Starship Winter

Starship Seasons - 3

Эрик Браун

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Annotation

That winter David Conway was enjoying a quiet life with his friends, not especially looking for love, but finding it anyway. The artist Matt Sommers was due to stage an exhibition of Epiphany Stones from Acrab IV, a show which attracted the attention of one Darius Dortmund, the famous empathy. Dortmund could see into the minds of men ‘some said into their very souls’ and when he met David and his friends, and looked into their minds, what he found there would lead to murder… Starship Winter, the third volume in the Starship Seasons sequence, continues the quiet adventures of Conway and his friends on the backwater colony world of Addenbrooke, Delta Pavonis IV.

- Eric Brown
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Eric Brown
STARSHIP WINTER

— ONE —

Winters are never harsh, here on Chalcedony.

There are no snowfalls, to which I was accustomed in my native Canada; no rainstorms or biting frosts. After the long, clement autumn, winter is presaged by the nightly passage of migrating swordbills flying south to hotter climes; then comes a long period, lasting some three Terran months, of cooler weather. It is never cold: I've never had to wear a coat on my evening outings to the local bar, the Fighting Jackeral, and during the day the sun shines constantly. Winter is the season when the Ring of Tharssos, the halo of fragmented moonlets which encircles the planet, sparkles silver at twilight, and the spindizzy bugs, those scintillating gyroscopic creatures, move from shola trees and fill the air above the coast with their kaleidoscopic light show.

Some tourists come to see the spindizzies, but for the most part the tiny settlement of Magenta Bay is quiet. The holiday villas are shut up for the season; most of the stores along the seafront are boarded up, and perhaps half the residents take the opportunity to move down to the capital city, Mackinley, for the winter, or visit family and friends back on Earth.

I always stay for the winter, enjoying the sense of isolation the season brings, that odd intimation, so common from childhood, of winter being an inimical time when wise people hole up for months and allow nature to take its course◦– even though, of course, nothing was ever inimical about winter on Chalcedony.

Nothing much happens during winter, but that year was different.

* * *

I met Darius Dortmund, the famous alien-empath, a week after his arrival on Chalcedony.

He was known throughout the Expansion as the man who single-handedly brokered the peace treaty between the colonists of Esperance, Groombridge III, and the native extraterrestrials. I say an "alien-empath", but of course he was human. He had earned that title because he had the peculiar ability to read the minds◦– some said the very souls◦– of alien subjects. Little was known about the man, other than he shunned publicity and was secretive about his ability. No one knew for certain how he had become empathetic, or even if he were actually *telepathic*. Was it true that he had gained his unique powers during an encounter with a vicious Lyran sand-devil? Had he, as some

claimed, absorbed the essence of that strange alien being, so that a part of him was in fact alien? Could he actually read *human* minds? Journalists and holo producers around the Expansion had been trying to answer these questions for years.

That morning was much like any other. I rose at seven, showered, and went for a long walk around the bay. I took my time, admiring the views. From the headland opposite my starship, the *Mantis*, I looked back along the scimitar sweep of red sands, backed by the tiny shapes of the beachfront A-frames and more exclusive villas. Inland, beyond Magenta Bay itself, the hills rose to the distant mountains, their purple summits concealed by mist. Even the golden column, the legacy of the Yall, could not be seen; only in winter, and at this hour, was the distinguishing feature of the planet hidden from view.

For some reason, that morning I was thinking back to my doomed love affair with the holo star Carlotta Chakravorti-Luna. It was over two years since her death and the events which surrounded it, and I was feeling melancholy and not a little lonely. The first six months after her passing had been the worst; a time made tolerable only by the constant presence of my friends Matt and Maddie, Hawk and Kee. Only infrequently since then had I been skewered by grief, and time had worked to make each jab of that skewer a little less painful.

Today, as I made my way back through the sliding red sands, I was wondering how my life might have been shaped had Carlotta lived, and we had married and settled down to domesticity aboard the *Mantis*. I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself, regretting the lonely hours between the times I met my friends.

As the sun rose higher, warming me and dispelling the mists, I told myself to snap out of it. I had always despised self-pity in others; there was no way I would allow myself to fall victim to that invidious emotion now.

I was almost back at the *Mantis* when I saw the stranger.

He was standing in the sand before the ship, hands clasped behind his back, staring up at the balcony which fronts the nose cone.

He was tall and thin, characteristics emphasised by his sharp white suit. I put him in his sixties or early seventies, with a thatch of white hair and a peculiar facial pallor which put me in mind of someone recovering from illness.

Seven years ago, after the events which led to our discovery of the true purpose of the golden column, visitors had flocked to Magenta Bay. At times the *Mantis* had been surrounded three-deep by curious onlookers. I had become something of a celebrity, and had sought refuge with my friends. Since then the furore had abated, and only the occasional visitor made the pilgrimage to Magenta Bay to gaze at the first starship to pass through the mysterious portal of the

Yall.

I took the stranger to be just another curious tourist.

He turned as I approached, and the first thing I noticed about his face was his piercing ice-blue eyes, in contrast to the deathly white of his flesh. My first impression of his character, gained from something in his lofty regard of me, was that he was arrogant: it was an impression that subsequent experience did nothing to dispel.

"I take it that you're David Conway?" he said.

"That's right."

"And I understand you're a friend of Matt Sommers, the artist?"

I chastised myself for feeling piqued that the stranger was seeking Matt, rather than myself. Then I felt relief, and curiosity. Something told me that the stranger was an off-worlder◦– maybe a rich gallery owner or collector?

I held out my hand. "Matt is a friend of mine, yes."

He gave me a gimlet regard for a fraction of a second, before extending his own hand. His palm was cold.

"Dortmund," he said. "Darius Dortmund."

I didn't know as much then about the man, or his reputation, as I was to learn over the next week, but the name was familiar. Wasn't he some kind of expert on alien affairs who used his empathy with the *other* to settle interspecies disputes?

I wondered at his interest in Matt.

Dortmund indicated the Fighting Jackeral, a couple of hundred metres along the beach. "I know it's early, but would you care for a drink?"

I said, "I haven't had breakfast yet. The Jackeral does great coffee and croissants."

* * *

We sat on the verandah, looking out over the bay. Dortmund ordered a double whisky on the rocks◦– at eight in the morning◦– and I a coffee with croissants and marmalade.

His first words, as he settled down with his drink and gazed out across the bay, were, "I can see that you have no idea who I am?"

I smiled to myself. I was glad that he was not looking at me; he was concentrating his regard on the sparkling Ring of Tharssos above the headlands. I noticed, then and in our subsequent meetings, that he only looked sparingly at the people in his presence. At first I assumed this was a characteristic of his natural arrogance; later I was to learn otherwise.

I took a sip of coffee. "The name is… familiar," I said. I played

dumb. “A fellow artist, a patron?” I suggested.

His expression remained neutral. The skin of his face, I noticed, was not only pale but seemed deficient of pigment, like a fresh canvas. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the arc of the Ring.

“I have been called an artist, Conway, but not an artist in any accepted sense. That is, not someone who creates works which represents their thoughts and feelings on the world around them. If I am an artist at all, then it is in the far more important sphere of facilitating the ability of individuals and societies to apprehend the subjective truths of their respective situations.”

It was a grand claim, and he sat in silence as I worked it out. At last I nodded. “I see…” I said. “And just how do you go about… facilitating this?”

He raised his glass to his lips with thin fingers and took a tight sip of whisky. “I apprehend the truth of a situation, of an individual or group, and dispense what I judge to be the appropriate recommendations. I am invariably right,” he finished.

I bit into a croissant, at a loss to know how to respond. After a growing silence, I said, “So… you mentioned Matt Sommers?”

He turned his head and looked at me. The effect of his piercing regard, coming as it did for the first time since we sat down, was disconcerting.

He said, “You are lonely, Conway.”

I stared at him, aware of holding a corner of croissant ludicrously before my open lips. “I don’t see what…” I began.

He raised a hand, as if to stall my objections, and turned his gaze out to sea. “I sense that you suffered loss recently, and use as a crutch the enduring friendship of those around you.”

“I wouldn’t call my friendship a crutch,” I said. I wondered whom he’d been talking to, to know so much about me.

“I sense”, he said again, with an air of pronouncement, “that your years on Chalcedony, after fleeing Earth, have been a period of withdrawal, almost of complacency. I would recommend a widening of your horizons, both geographically and personally◦– that is, you are a man in search of, in need of, love.”

I felt a curious ambivalence of emotions, then: first of all anger at the arrogant assumptions of this superior stranger, and then a gnawing apprehension that what he had said might contain a grain of truth.

Not that I would admit as much. “After what I went through on Earth”, I began, “I needed to get away. Matt and Maddie, Hawk and Kee… they’ve become my family.” As soon as I said this, I hated myself for feeling I had to justify my situation.

I said, “Anyway… I presume you didn’t come here to talk about

me. You mentioned Matt?"

I was relieved when he nodded and said, "I take it he has returned to Chalcedony?"

"He came back last week." He'd been away a month◦– on Epiphany, Acrab IV◦– a month away from Maddie, which he'd said was torture. He'd brought back a collection of what he called Epiphany Stones, which would be the centrepiece of his next work of art, due to be shown down at Mackinley in a few days.

Dortmund nodded. "Has Sommers told you anything about why he was on Epiphany, Conway?"

I decided to play my cards close to my chest. Matt had said something about the Stones he'd brought back, but I had no intention of telling Dortmund this.

"No. It's all a bit hush-hush." I hesitated, then said, "I'm eager to see the exhibition on Thursday."

He inclined his head. "As am I, Conway. As am I."

He finished his drink, rose to his considerable height, and inclined his head at me. Again his regard made me uneasy: I gained from the cold look in his eyes the idea that he was merely gazing upon me to confirm the negative impression he had already formed.

"I will see you at the exhibition," he said, and stepped from the verandah.

I watched him walk across the sands, around the Fighting Jackeral, and disappear from sight.

* * *

I was about to order another coffee when a heavy hand fell on my shoulder. I looked up. "Hawk!"

I stood and embraced him, feeling the occipital console that spanned his shoulders like a yoke, and the spinal jacks which he used to interface with his starship.

He was wearing his faded black leather jacket and his piratical face was unshaven. All he needed to complete the image was an eye-patch◦– and perhaps a voluble parrot on his shoulder.

"How was the trip?" I asked. He'd taken Matt to Epiphany, via the golden column, and I hadn't seen him since his return.

Maddie was behind him. "They had a great time," she said. "I wish I'd gone with them."

After the frosty presence of Darius Dortmund, it was nice to be in the company of friends. We ordered coffee. "No Matt? And where's Kee?" I asked.

Hawk laughed. "Where else? She's tending her garden." Kee kept

a small plot of beautiful native plants at Hawk's shipyard.

"Matt's down in Mackinley," Maddie said. "The exhibition's taking up his every spare minute. But it should be something special."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. I loved Matt's opening nights, when I could watch my friend relax, after months or years of hard work, and bask in the rewards of creation.

"So…" I said to Hawk. "The trip."

He said, "Epiphany was… well, magical sounds lame, but it was. It's a pastoral planet; the aliens there are hunter-gatherers. Rainforests with trees miles high, and flowers the size of sails◦– the gravity's much less strong there, you see. And there's something about the air… as if it's infused with a drug. Every breath is invigorating."

I'd seen Matt briefly on his return, and he'd mentioned the Epiphany Stones in passing. It was a project he'd been working on for a year or more, but before the trip he'd kept tight-lipped about it lest the art world got to know and a publicity leak pre-empted the announcement of the exhibition. From Mackinley it was due to go on to Earth, where it was booked to show in Paris, London and Manila.

"Matt said that the stones were magical, too?" I fished.

Hawk smiled. "Matt wouldn't tell me why exactly they were so special. We were taken by the equivalent of a bullock cart from the spaceport and into the mountains. From there it was a two-day trek through the rainforest to their◦– the Elan's◦– holy city, more of a great, sprawling township, really. I spent the next day wandering around, admiring the views, while Matt was in conference with the Elan's holy elite."

"Requesting the stones?" I said.

Hawk nodded. "And he was successful, obviously. With one condition."

I took a mouthful of beer. "Which was?"

"That the stones be accompanied at all times by a member of the Elan's holy orders◦– an Ambassador."

"So you brought the Ambassador back aboard the ship?"

"He'll be at the opening night on Thursday."

Maddie said, "I'm more than curious to see the alien. He's been holed up with the stones at the exhibition centre all week.." Cut: Won't leave them for a minute."

I looked at Hawk. "What do they look like? The aliens, I mean."

Hawk shrugged his great shoulders. "Small, just over a metre high, very thin and delicate, and furred. It's the colour of their fur that's odd, though. They're turquoise."

I tried to envisage these creatures. "They sound fascinating. And they're friendly?"

Hawk nodded. "Extremely so." He thought about it. "I suppose

you'd call the Elan innocent, guileless." He shrugged. "Matt was over the moon when they agreed to loan him the stones. This is the first time any have been allowed off-planet."

I looked at Maddie. "What did he do to get them to agree?"

"The Elan were aware of his work," she said. "Matt had an exhibition of crystals on Epiphany about ten years ago, and the Ambassador attended it. He was bowled over, apparently."

Hawk said, "Matt visited Epiphany back then and heard about the stones. He became aware of the Elan's reaction to his exhibition only later, and that's when the idea formed to use the Epiphany Stones in an artwork."

"Did you see the stones?"

Hawk nodded. "I was allowed to accompany Matt into the underground chamber where they're housed." He shrugged. "They're nothing special, visually. About this long, by this…" His big hands described the approximate shape of a gold ingot. "And pale blue."

"Why are they so special?"

Matt had said something about their somehow communicating aspects of Elan history when I saw him the other day, but I think he'd wanted to save the surprise for the opening night.

"Well, Matt was cagey when it came to describing the stones," Hawk laughed.

"Cagey?" Maddie said. "He wouldn't even tell me!"

"He did say something about the stones being…" Hawk shrugged. "They were somehow recordings of, or in some way stored, details of Elan ancestors. The Elan don't have a written history. Apparently it's all in the stones."

I considered my encounter with Dortmund earlier. "Do either of you know anything about someone called Dortmund? Darius Dortmund? He seemed very interested in Matt's exhibition."

Maddie opened her eyes wide and stared at me. "Dortmund? So he's been hounding you, too?"

I smiled. "I saw him this morning for the first time. He's an odd character."

"Odd?" Hawk exclaimed. "The guy gives me the shivers. He was nosing around the yard a couple of days after I got back, wanting to know all about our trip to Epiphany and the stones."

Maddie said, "He called on me yesterday with so many questions…"

I looked at my friends. "Excuse my ignorance, but just who the hell is he? He spun me a line about being some kind of… of facilitator between peoples, societies."

Maddie smiled. "You haven't heard of Darius Dortmund, the alien-empath? Where have you been for the past ten years, David?"

“Alien-empath?” I repeated. “He looked human enough to me.”

Maddie laughed. “He is human, though from his manner I do wonder… No, he has some kind of empathetic ability which enables him to read the emotions and feelings of certain people and aliens. He uses this to settle disputes between antagonistic factions around the Expansion.”

I frowned. “And how did he become… empathetic?”

Hawk leaned back in his seat, hands clasped behind his head. “I’ve heard a number of stories. The most prosaic is that he was found to have a mild psionic ability and underwent an enhancement operation, back on Earth.”

Maddie leaned forward. “And the not-so-prosaic story?”

“Well, there’s the frankly daft, media-driven story that he was on Lyra VII, in the desert, and he was savaged by a sand-devil. The story goes that it stopped short of killing him and that when he came round he found himself inhabited by the consciousness of the beast.”

I laughed. “I think I’d go for the enhancement operation,” I said.

“According to some sources I accessed”, Hawk went on, “Dortmund is not only empathetic, but telepathic.”

I shifted uneasily in my seat, recalling the man’s manner this morning, his disinclination to look at me during our conversation◦– his disinclination, or the fact that he did not need to look at me to discern my reaction to his questions.

I recalled his assessment of me as lonely, and I shivered at the thought of my mind being so open to the stranger.

I said, “What makes you think…?”

Hawk looked at me. “Well, for one thing the way he asked questions but never seemed to follow them up◦– as if the initial question was merely a prompt to get me thinking about the subject he wanted me to consider, and then he read the rest. The way he rarely looked me in the eye, as if not needing to do so.”

I nodded. “I noticed that, too.”

“And something else,” Hawk went on. “He said something about me and Kee which no one knows about◦– so it wasn’t as if he could have found out by asking anyone. And the thing was, I’d been thinking about Kee just before he turned up.”

Maddie said, “He asked me questions about Matt, his latest work… but like you said, Hawk, he then dropped it as if he’d found out all he wanted.” She shivered. “I didn’t like the man at all.”

I nodded. “Me neither. And I don’t like the idea that he might be telepathic.”

Maddie said, more to herself, “But I wonder why he wanted to know about Matt and the stones?”

“Well, he’ll be at the opening night of the exhibition,” Hawk said.

“I don’t know how he managed to wangle himself an invitation, but we might be able find out more then.”

Hawk then suggested we make a session of it and ordered a round of beers. I sat back and stared out across the bay, considering Darius Dortmund and the imminent exhibition.

— TWO —

Spindizzies are beautiful creatures.

The females of the species leave the shola trees in great swarms at twilight and hover over the bay, their four-part wing systems catching the light of the setting sun as Delta Pavonis dips, swollen and bloody, into the sea. The insects present a beautiful sight then, as a panoply of golden light plays across their flickering wings, but this is merely a prelude to the show that will follow. Minutes later they are joined by a cloud of males. They mate in mid-air, and together they pulse in a polychromatic display like diamonds on fire. Imagine millions of these individual points of strobing, multicoloured light strung out along the coast, and you can understand why visitors flock to watch in silent wonder.

I was sitting at a table on the cantilevered patio at the exhibition centre, looking out over the Mackinley straits. Maddie, Hawk and Kee were with me. I had grabbed a table by the rail in order to have a ringside view when the spindizzies arrived. It's a sight that I never tire of watching.

"Here come the ladies," Maddie said, her eyes wide. She looked stunning tonight in a long black dress, her golden ringlets framing her pale, heart-shaped face.

"Look at that!" Hawk laughed. He might have presented the façade of a macho buccaneer, but it couldn't conceal the romantic streak that ran close to the surface.

We gasped as a mist of scintillating spindizzies swept over the domed roof of the exhibition centre and roiled above the straits. Experts have calculated that over a million female insects swarm in the overture to the show, their shimmering wings refracting the light of the setting sun. Cries of delight rose from the watchers around us.

Kee, a tiny blonde Ashentay, gripped Hawk's arm like a child and stared open-mouthed. She might have looked human to the uninitiated eye◦– though human in miniature, with bird-like bones, a thin face and unnaturally large eyes◦– but Kee was as alien as the spindizzies, and the insects held a sacred place in the mythology of her people.

"And here come the males of the species," Hawk said.

A dark cloud, thick as ink, rolled over the exhibition centre and headed straight for the vast, reflective mass of their prospective mates.

Kee raised a hand to her forehead in a quick, reverential gesture, murmuring something in the language of her people. Gazing at the spindizzies, Hawk murmured a translation, "Summer and Winter, the year turns, the kalay◦– the spindizzies◦– conjoin in wondrous

harmony. We are blessed."

Over the straits, the male and female spindizzies met, swirled, and seconds later it happened.

The spindizzies mated, and the bodies of the females lit up suddenly like tiny, coloured neon tubes. Multiplied a million-fold, the spectacle was staggering. No human firework display could match the vibrancy or the extent of the pulsing, shifting play of colour as the insects swarmed and surged in paroxysms of coital joy.

I found myself laughing in pure delight. Around me, others were crying at the sight.

The display lasted perhaps ten minutes, followed by the aftermath, which I always found subtly moving and melancholy. The airborne glow died as suddenly as it had begun, to be replaced by the last glitter of sunlight through the females' wings. The males, dark shapes like massed iron filings, then fell away, spent and dead, and floated down to the surface of the sea. For the next few weeks their husky carcasses would be washed up on the beaches along the length of the coast.

The females, for their part, returned fertilised to their lairs in the shola tress, where they would lay their eggs and hibernate for the winter. In spring their young would be born and take wing in another, though lesser, display of alien biological wonder.

We drank our beers and watched the female spindizzies pass overhead in small groups.

There was a murmur of comment in the crowd behind us, and we turned to see Matt moving through the parting press towards us. He was accompanied by Chandranath, the director of the exhibition centre, and◦– I was surprised to see◦– none other than Darius Dortmund.

The off-worlder wore the same white suit as the other day, and in the fading twilight he seemed even paler than the first time we met.

Dortmund bent towards Matt to say something as they approached, and Matt was scowling at the off-worlder's remarks.

I did not notice the fourth member of their group until they were almost upon us. She was walking in their wake, a slim blonde woman I judged to be in her late thirties, elfin and smiling. I thought at first that she was a native Ashentay, and that she was partnering Dortmund, an idea I found disconcerting.

They joined us and a waiter dispensed drinks. Chandranath introduced Dortmund, redundantly, as we'd all made his acquaintance, and then the woman, who I now saw was not alien.

"Lieutenant van Harben of the Mackinley Police Department," Chandranath said.

We exchanged handshakes and small talk, and I found myself

standing next to van Harben at the rail while the others discussed art-related topics amongst themselves.

She smiled up at me, playing with the stem of her wine glass. Her eyes were startlingly green. “I read about you and your friends before I came to Chalcedony,” she said. Her voice was soft, tinged with an accent I judged to be Northern European.

I smiled. “Don’t believe everything you read,” I quipped. A lot had been reported about how Matt, Maddie, Hawk and I had stumbled on the secret of the Yall, not a quarter of it accurate.

“I didn’t,” she said. “Anyway, it’s nice to meet you in the flesh.”

I gestured towards Dortmund, who was pontificating on some subject in his characteristic manner: that is, speaking but not visually addressing his audience. He was gazing out to sea at the female spindizzies drifting inland.

“Did you come to Chalcedony with Dortmund?” I asked. It was the most diplomatic way I could think of ascertaining whether or not they were together.

She stabbed a glance at the off-worlder, saying, “*That*… man? No. No, of course not. I came here six months ago to take up the post of Lieutenant with the Mackinley Police Department.”

I nodded, sipping my drink to hide my reaction: I had that involuntary, sexist male response of surprise when I encountered a woman in an unexpected role. Call me ignorant, but my image of Detective Inspectors was of burly, middle-aged, cynical men with alcohol dependencies.

“But I take it you’re off duty tonight, Lieutenant?”

“Wrong, Mr Conway,” she said. “I might be out of uniform, but I’m working. I’m heading a team to ensure that everything here runs like clockwork.”

I smiled. I hadn’t heard that archaic expression since my childhood.

I think it was then that I knew I was going to screw up my courage and, at some point in the evening, ask Lieutenant van Harben if she would care for a drink, or even a meal, later that week.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your first name,” I said. “And it doesn’t feel right calling you Lieutenant all night.”

She laughed, and proffered her hand again. “Of course, I’m sorry. I’m Hannah.” And it might have been my imagination, or hope, but I detected that she held onto my hand for a moment longer than etiquette required.

“So you’ve made the acquaintance of Mr Darius Dortmund,” I said.

She leaned towards me and said in a lowered tone, “Can’t stand the man. There’s something about him… he’s not only arrogant, but

creepy."

I raised my glass. "I'll second that, Hannah."

"He got into an argument with Matt Sommers ten minutes ago about the validity of his artwork◦– and particularly this exhibition. Dortmund claimed it transgressed art and strayed onto the territory of cultural profanity."

"What did Matt say?"

"He was brilliant. He said all art was about broadening human◦– and alien◦– understanding of experience, and as such his current artwork was doing that. He cited the compliance of the Elan themselves in the project. Dortmund started to object, but that's when Director Chandranath suggested we go outside to watch the spindizzies."

"What did you think of them?"

She shook her head. "I can safely say I've never ever seen anything quite so beautiful."

"Have you ventured out of Mackinley since your arrival?"

She shook her head. "Too busy with work."

"The coast, especially north of here, is spectacular. I live up at Magenta Bay."

She nodded. "I've read about your ship, the *Mantis*."

"You should come up some time. I'll show you around. The foothills have a series of incredible waterfalls…" I stumbled to a halt, blushing like a schoolboy.

She reached out, gripped my hand, and tipped her head to one side. "I'd like that," she said.

She released my hand just as there was another commotion among those gathered behind us. Heart racing, I turned to see a tiny, blue-green figure step daintily through the crowd towards us.

He was perhaps three feet tall, and thin, with long spindly legs which had two sets of knees. His torso seemed disproportionately compacted, and his arms◦– again with double joints◦– too long. His facial features were almost reassuringly normal, in that he had two large eyes and a long mouth. I found myself thinking the alien's head resembled some kind of bushbaby or lemur.

He paused before our group, bobbing slightly on the suspension of his bi-jointed legs.

Matt made the introductions. "This is Heanor, Ambassador of the Elan. Heanor, I'd like to introduce you to my good friends."

As Matt spoke our names, the alien Ambassador looked at us each in turn, shaping a graceful gesture in the air before his chest. "I am pleased to meet you," he said in a high, reedy voice, then looked up at Matt and went on, "I am happy with the conjunction of events, Mr Sommers. I am happy to see the exhibition commence. I would be

pleased if you might commence the opening ceremony."

Matt nodded graciously, cleared his throat and said, "Ladies and gentlemen…" A hush settled over the assembled guests. "I'm not going to make a big speech. My art speaks for itself, I hope. I will say, however, that this piece marks a radical departure in my work, as you will shortly appreciate. Also, I would like to thank the kindness and understanding of the Elan people in affording me the opportunity to bring from their homeworld the Epiphany Stones that comprise this installation, entitled *Concordance*." He bowed his head to Heanor, and murmured something I took to be in the Elan language, and then, "My eternal gratitude."

I happened to glance at Dortmund, then. He was watching the artist with an expression which mixed annoyance and disgust.

Matt raised his arms. "Please, if you would care to make your way to the main hall…"

Hannah caught my eye, tipped her head and gave a quick smile. "Shall we?"

We moved with the crowd towards the entrance.

* * *

The exhibition centre was a big, low-slung dome, perhaps a hundred metres in diameter. Usually it was divided into sections for exhibitions and shows, but tonight the entire floor space was given over to *Concordance*.

The interior of the dome was dimly lit, to begin with. Then, as the guests entered the exhibition, a centrally mounted ceiling light, like some kind of giant pendant ruby, began to glow. As we watched, perhaps fifty individual beams of crimson light spoked from the ruby and struck the faceted surfaces of as many stones located on plinths around the dome.

There was a gasp from a guest up ahead. I made out a woman in her fifties, who had approached one of the faceted stones.

Beside me, Hannah grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Look."

A nimbus of verdant light surrounded the woman, and within the circumference of that light I could see the shapes of small, moving figures. They were Elan, a trio of the small beings seemingly addressing the woman, phantom figures gesturing with their long, bi-jointed arms as she stared at them in wonder.

Other guests had approached the plinthed Epiphany Stones and were similarly bathed in light and confronted by the ghostly alien figures.

I moved to a vacant stone, pleasantly aware that Hannah was at

my side. I glanced at her before entering the stone's activation field. "You first," I said.

She touched my arm. "Let's do it together, David."

Side by side we took a step forward. Instantly a bright light hit us◦– sky blue this time◦– and I experienced an odd, and unsettling, sensation of being disconnected from my immediate surroundings. Not only did I no longer seem to be in the exhibition centre, but I had the intimation that I was no longer on Chalcedony. I looked out, beyond the central radiance emanating from the stone, but could not make out the rest of the dome.

I glanced at Hannah. "Do you feel that?"

She nodded, a pinched expression of concern on her elfin features. She had taken my hand. "It's… where are we, David? I feel as if I'm on another planet."

The odd thing was that, although I knew we were in a nimbus of light no more than two metres across, it was as if we were standing upon a vast plain without boundaries, as if we might set off walking and never step from the encapsulating light.

I laughed. "Me too. Hey◦– look."

In the distance I saw three alien figures approaching us. They were Elan, and for some reason I gained the impression that they were aged and wise. They came within a metre of Hannah and me, stopped and gazed at us with their big, round eyes.

And I was flooded with a sensation of… how can I express this without seeming insane or gullible? I felt then that I was in some kind of communication with these beings. No words were exchanged, not even gestures. It was a mind-to-mind thing, a meeting of emotions, perhaps. I was overcome with a sense of peace, of harmony◦– an intimation of the universal oneness of all things in existence.

I felt Hannah's small weight against me, almost as if she were swooning. "It's like… like music," she gasped.

That was, I thought, the best way to describe the sensation. It was wordless, thoughtless, a communication that transcended species barriers and the need for the normal channels of explication.

The figures gestured, and there was something reassuring and gentle about the grace of their movements. They retreated, backed away, and the blue light surrounding us suddenly vanished, pitching us into the stark reality of the exhibition dome.

"Good God," I said as I staggered from the plinth. Hannah was with me, and I realised that we were still holding hands. I looked around, shocked by the fact of my sudden translocation back into the real world.

All around, others were undergoing the same shocked transition. Hawk and Kee came up to us. They were speechless. We stared at each

other, smiling inanely.

At last Hawk said, pointing to the stone he and Kee had just stepped away from, “Try that one, it’s… it’s *magical*…”

Hannah nodded and like an eager child dragged me over to the plinth. We stepped into its embrace.

This time, the light that surrounded us was cerise, and again I experienced that odd sense of dislocation, as if we were no longer on Chalcedony. Two figures approached us, two bent and stooped Elan, who regarded us with their massive eyes and gestured with their oddly articulated arms. And the mood communicated this time was of loss◦– I was filled with a moving sense of bereavement, not for an individual person, but the universal melancholy of that inexplicable and inescapable pre-emptive grief, almost terror, that grips you in the empty early hours when the preoccupying details of daytime are gone and you apprehend the unavoidable fact of your mortality and the fact that you will be dead for all eternity. Beside me, Hannah was weeping quietly.

And then, suddenly, the aliens reached out, one to Hannah and the other to me, and their ghostly hands seemed to brush our brows. And how to describe the rush of nameless emotion that assailed us then, for I was sure that Hannah was undergoing the same.

The sense of loss and fear was banished, and I knew◦– I knew with a certainty beyond all doubt◦– that life would not end with my death; that existence was ongoing and eternal, that the ills of the physical were but a passing phase that would be transcended when I passed from this life to the next.

I was filled with a joy beyond description◦– and then the light ceased and Hannah and I were back in the mundane surrounds of the dome.

Tears tracked down her pale cheeks and we came together suddenly in an embrace that celebrated what we had just experienced.

Hannah shook her head. “But how does Matt do it? I mean… it’s more than just art!”

I laughed. “What did he say, that art was all about broadening human and alien understanding of experience? I’d say he’s pretty well succeeded in doing that.”

“Me too. I can’t wait to ask him how he managed it.”

“Knowing Matt”, I said, “I think he’ll want to keep the secret to himself. Like a magician, you know?”

She tugged my arm. “Shall we try another one?”

“Try stopping me.”

For the next hour we moved from stone to stone, as entranced as the rest of the guests. We passed through three very different experiences. One communicated to us the joy of birth; it was as if the

essence of the feeling I experienced at the birth of my daughter had been somehow distilled by alien alchemists and poured into my soul.

The emotion conveyed by the next stone seemed to be the futility of hatred, at least that was how I interpreted it: I was assailed by vengeful feelings, swiftly followed by a notion of the negativity of these feelings.

The next stone communicated an emotion so alien, so inexplicable– yet always hovering on the very cusp of my apprehension– then it vanished, like the content of a dream upon awaking, as the light ceased and returned us to the dome.

"David!" Hannah said, thrusting her wrist in front of my eyes. "Look, we've been in the dome for more than an hour and a half. And yet… I could have sworn we've experienced each stone for no more than five minutes."

"Yet another wonder of the things," I murmured.

I was about to suggest we take a break and have a drink when I noticed a commotion at the far side of the dome. One of the guests had evidently found the experience too much and collapsed. A couple of first-aiders had hurried to assist, followed by Matt Sommers and the Elan Ambassador. As the guest climbed to his feet, waving away all offers of help, I saw that it was Darius Dortmund. He hurried for the exit to the patio, accompanied by Matt.

Hannah was frowning to herself, and I wondered if she was thinking the same as me: that perhaps, due to his heightened empathetic ability, Dortmund had found the extraterrestrial displays just too much.

"How about a drink?" Hannah suggested, taking the words from my mouth.

We moved to the patio, where the last rays of the sun were playing over the waters of the straights. Dortmund and Matt were at the rail, speaking in lowered tones. The off-worlder was clutching a whisky.

Maddie, Hawk and Kee were seated at a table in the bar area. Maddie waved us over. "Well, what do you think?"

"Amazing," I said, then laughed at the inadequacy of my response. "I thought Matt's emotion crystals were great, but these are something else."

"I've never experienced anything like it," Hannah said.

I ordered a couple of beers from a waiter. "But how does he do it?" I said.

Maddie said, "Well, why don't you ask the man himself?"

Matt had joined us, clutching a glass of beer and looking thunderous. Now Matt is usually the most pacific of people; I'd rarely seen him angry about anything. I looked beyond him. Dortmund was

at the bar, ordering another whisky.

Maddie laid a hand on Matt's arm. "What is it?"

He gave a tight smile, shaking his head. "I just find Dortmund's attitude arrogant and… ignorant," he said. "Let's forget him, anyway."

Hannah said, "We enjoyed the exhibition, Matt."

"It's exceeded all my expectations. Even when I was setting it up, I never dreamed the experience would be quite so… so powerful."

"David was wondering how you achieved the effect," Maddie said, smiling. "Come on, your secret's safe with us." As an aside to us, she went on, "I live with him, and he's not said a word to me!"

Matt relented. "It's no secret really. The Epiphany Stones are religious relics to the Elan. They contain the essences of their ancestors◦– each stone housing, if you like, the lineage of certain families."

Hawk, ever the materialist, was frowning. "You mean, they *believe* the stones contain these essences, or that they really do?"

Matt pursed his lips, tipping his head. "The Elan believe", he said, "and so do I. Of course, I didn't before I went to Epiphany. I'd read about the stones. I was intrigued. But what I experienced on the planet…"

"When you were with the elders in the cavern?" Hawk asked.

Matt nodded. I looked at Hannah. She was wide-eyed. Matt said, "The Elan believe that when they die◦– that is, when their bodies die◦– their souls migrate to the stones. Of course, the stones have to be in the vicinity. It's considered a tragedy if an Elan dies away from a stone. Anyway, when they die, their souls or essences are imprinted within the atomic matrices of the stones◦– and their descendants are able to commune with the stones, with their ancestors."

"And you experienced this with the elders?" Hannah asked.

"Not as such. They gave me a drug, a sedative, which sent me into a trance. An elder then communed with his family stone, and with the facility of the drug I was able to apprehend a small part of the wonder he was experiencing." He shrugged. "After that, it was a technical problem I had to solve: how to make something of that experience available to a human audience. That's what I've been working on for the past year, before my second trip to Epiphany to formally request from the Elan the loan of fifty stones."

Hawk was still frowning. "But do you really think the stones contain the souls of the aliens, or are they merely recording devices which store an impression of their essences?"

Matt pointed a stubby forefinger at the pilot. "Now that, my friend, is the big question. I suppose it depends on your philosophical standpoint."

"But how were you able to communicate what's in the stones to

us?" Hannah wanted to know.

Matt shook his head. "I don't think I have. That is, I haven't been able to communicate the full experience. What I've done is suggest, through piezoelectric enhancement, a small part of the content of the stones. You can't really communicate with the spectral Elan you see when in the vicinity of the stones, merely understand a mood or feeling."

"Whatever it is", I said, "it's damned powerful."

"But", said a new voice to the group, "is it art?"

Like a ghost, Dortmund had joined us. He stood beside the table, clutching a tumbler and looking superior. He drew up a seat◦– a barstool was all that was available◦– and sat down side-saddle, looming over us.

He did not look at any one of us, as was his habit, but rather stared down at the centre of the table as he said, "I mean, I don't wish to demean Sommers' technical accomplishment in staging this… 'show', but I would question whether it is really a valid rendition of what it is to be Elan, or whether it's merely a meretricious, I might even say sensationalist, pantomime."

Matt said, reasonably, "I never meant it to be a comprehensive statement on what it is to be Elan◦– that's impossible. How can the member of one species really apprehend what it's like to be another? I meant to give some approximation. To communicate this fundamental fact◦– that despite the differences between the Elan and humans, we have a lot in common."

Dortmund smiled to himself. "I think that answers my question satisfactorily, then. The exhibition is no more than a pantomime."

"Don't be so bloody sententious, Dortmund!" This came from Hannah, seated beside me, and I stared at her in surprise. She was sitting back in her chair and staring at the off-worlder.

Dortmund then did something odd◦– odd, that is, considering his previous aversion to eye contact. He stared at Hannah, piercingly. "Sententious?"

I expected his gaze to flick away, to rest on the centre of the table again, but it remained fixed on Hannah.

She said, "Just because your ability enables you to commune with the stones and thereby gain a heightened experience of what they contain, that doesn't mean you have the right to demean the experience the rest of us have had." She held his gaze, unflinching.

He remained staring at her. He wore an odd expression, as if trying to read something in her features, but was unable to do so.

He said, "But my dear, I don't demean the value of your experience, I merely criticise the value of the exhibition as a work of so-called art. After all, if criticism has any validity, then surely the

considered opinion of a critic with honed expertise and insight ought to be respected."

Matt joined in. "But you're not bringing artistic criteria to the exhibition, Dortmund. You have your own agenda. I present *Concordance* as a work of art, not of xeno-ethnological fidelity."

"Which brings me back to my initial question," Dortmund said. "Is it art?"

Hannah said, "What is art, anyway, but a means of communicating experience? I'd say that Matt's exhibition pretty much fulfils that criteria."

Dortmund gave his maddeningly superior, frosty smile. Oddly, his gaze hadn't left Hannah since she'd first spoken. "It brings a tawdry, diluted vaudeville of second-hand emotion to a jaded, bourgeois audience," he said.

Maddie said, "Well, we could be arguing this point all night. Who's for another drink?"

While she collected orders, Dortmund slipped from his stool and moved across to the rail. I noticed, as he did so, that his stare never left Hannah.

I looked at her. She was watching him as he turned and stood with his back to us, gazing out across the waters of the straight.

I murmured, "I don't think he likes you, Hannah."

She took my hand and squeezed. "Then the sentiment is reciprocated."

Maddie ordered drinks and we chatted of other things. At one point, as Hannah was in conversation with Hawk and Kee, Maddie touched my arm and murmured, "You two are getting on rather well, if I might say?"

I smiled. "She is rather wonderful, Maddie."

Later that evening, after a few more drinks, I screwed up my courage and said to Hannah, "Ah… you said you'd like to see more of the exhibition. It opens officially tomorrow, and I know a great restaurant on the seafront. I was wondering…"

She tipped her head to one side and smiled at me. "That would be fantastic, David."

"Great. And there'll be another show of spindizzies to watch."

For the rest of the evening I felt like an adolescent on the eve of his first date.

Much later, as we finished our drinks and were about to leave, I happened to glance across at Darius Dortmund, still standing by the balcony rail. I think I was the only one among the group who saw what happened next.

The last of the female spindizzies were making their way inland, and one or two had lost their way and strayed into the bar area. One

approached Dortmund by the rail, the insect a thing of scintillating beauty. As it sailed by him at head height, the bar lights catching its iridescent wings, the off-worlder reached out quickly, snatched the spindizzy from the air, and crushed the hapless creature in his fist.

Which was shocking enough, but even more so was the expression of satisfaction on his cold, pale face.

I looked across at Kee to make sure she had not witnessed this arbitrary act of cruelty, but she was hanging onto Hawk's arms and laughing at something he was saying.

The evening was at an end and I followed the others from the patio.

— THREE —

The following evening I met Hannah at a seafront bar. We had a couple of drinks then moved on to the restaurant. She was wearing a short yellow dress, her only adornment a black velvet choker set with a green oval stone which matched her eyes. As she walked into the bar, my breath caught at the sight of her. I wanted to say how wonderful she looked, but stopped myself from such crassness.

"It's lovely to see you. Can I get you a drink?"

We kissed cheeks and she said, "I could really kill a beer, David," and her accent sent a thrill through me.

We slipped into easy conversation from the outset, and my nervousness diminished. We talked and laughed, and I told myself that this was meant to be.

We dined outside by the old harbour, swapping our stories as the light show of the spindizzy mating ritual raged above the straits. The restaurant specialised in local Chalcedony food, and we ordered grilled jackeral and a red salad, my favourite, accompanied by a local rosé.

The most amazing thing about the evening was how easily the conversation flowed. There was never a second when I felt awkward or self-conscious. We made each other laugh with stories of our past, her childhood in rural Holland and mine in British Columbia.

Hannah had been married, briefly, in her early thirties, to a fellow police officer. All she said was that the marriage had been a big mistake, and had ended without recriminations a year later.

I told her about my failed marriage to a gallery owner, about the accident that claimed my daughter, and how the marriage had never recovered from the grief of our mutual loss.

"And that's when you came to Chalcedony," Hannah said.

"And met Matt and Maddie, Hawk and Kee."

"They're nice people, David. They made me feel so comfortable last night, as if I were one of the crowd."

I smiled. "They're like that. They're… I know this'll sound corny, but I consider them family." I took a long swallow of wine, beaming at my companion. "Anyway, that's enough of me◦– what brought you here?"

She shrugged. "I suppose I became sick of work on Earth. I was stationed in Rotterdam, with the Homicide Division. I was with the force almost twenty-five years and I was becoming jaded. Desensitised. The murders became… routine. I decided I had to get out."

I did a quick calculation. "Twenty-five years? So you joined the

police straight from school?"

She laughed, covering her mouth with a small hand. "David! You're trying to flatter me! I joined in my mid-twenties."

I stared at her. "You're fifty?"

"Next year."

"Christ… I mean, I had you down as not a day over forty. I was worried that our age difference…" I stopped, flustered.

She reached out and touched my hand. "David, it wouldn't matter if you were eighty. Honestly."

I laughed. "Well, I'm not quite that old. Just eight years your senior."

"A mere youngster," she smiled. "Hey, look, we've almost finished the bottle. How about another half?"

I agreed to that excellent proposal, and when it arrived I poured two glasses. "So why Chalcedony particularly?"

She shrugged, and I found that slight hitch of her slim shoulders◦– like every other gesture she made◦– enchanting. "I was looking for somewhere quiet. I'd never been off-world, and I thought I should experience it before I grew too old. Then I saw a posting advertised here in Mackinley. It sounded great: not too onerous, but with a little responsibility. So I applied, was accepted, then read up on the planet. I'd heard about the golden column, of course, but I never realised that one day I'd be dining with… what did that book call you?"

I held up a hand. "Please, don't embarrass me!"

"The Opener of the Way." She tipped her head, looking at me. "How does that make you feel, David?"

I often looked back on the accidental chain of events that led to Hawk flying the *Mantis* into the golden column◦– and finding that the alien bolt of light was a gateway between two points in space. The discovery opened up the spaceways again, revolutionised star travel, and made Telemass transportation a second-rate means of travelling the Expansion.

I smiled. "I'm a very ordinary person who was caught up in a very extraordinary chain of events. I'm thankful more for having met my friends back then, though of course it was all bound up together." I shrugged. "I think I'm the most fortunate person on the planet."

She looked at me over her glass. "And there's never been anyone since your wife?"

I told her that I'd had a brief fling a couple of years ago , and she nodded to herself and allowed me to change the subject.

"I hope this doesn't sound sexist, but you're not what I would imagine a police lieutenant to be."

She smiled. "I know what you mean. How could I fight my way out of a tricky situation with my build?" She tipped her head. "Well,

I'm trained for things like that, of course. But the reality is that police work these days is all about up here," she tapped her temple. "It's about working out motives, assessing psychological states, making lateral cognitive leaps."

"I think you displayed that last night when you argued with Dortmund," I said. "I was impressed."

"Him?" She blew, dismissing the off-worlder. "Dortmund is an egotist with megalomaniacal traits. Let's not talk about him."

We finished the wine and I suggested we make our way to the exhibition.

Hannah laughed. "I've been anticipating this all day! Let's go."

We left the restaurant and made the short walk along the seafront to the exhibition centre.

* * *

Word had evidently got out that Matt Sommers' latest show was something special. There was a long queue outside the entrance and officials were allowing entry to only six individuals at a time. We had to wait for about fifteen minutes before being allowed inside, but the wait only increased our anticipation.

We stepped into the chamber◦– illuminated by the central ruby light casting radial lances at the fifty stones◦– like children entering Santa's grotto. I was delighted when Hannah took my hand and led me across to a plinth we had not experienced yesterday: I had feared she might want to enjoy the stones alone.

The first stone bathed us in tangerine light and communicated something which Hannah later described as "an alien Gaia experience". We were one with the planet of Epiphany, escorted through a series of natural wonders◦– mountains and waterfalls and rift valleys◦– by a pair of venerable Elan. For a long time we ceased to be ourselves, all thoughts of life on Chalcedony banished, as we absorbed the unspoilt natural beauty of the alien world.

We tottered from the stone when the light dimmed, a little drunk with the experience. Hannah looked at her watch. "My God, David. We were in there an hour!"

I shook my head. "I'd've guessed fifteen minutes…"

Hannah stiffened. She was still holding my hand and I felt her whole body tense. "What…?" I began.

Then I saw what she was looking at, or rather who.

Darius Dortmund had stepped from a plinth across the dome, and was approaching a neighbouring stone. He was accompanied by an Elan. At first I thought the alien was Heanor, the Ambassador. But this

one was smaller, and he seemed older, stooped, with threadbare patches on his shoulders and back.

"Who's his friend?" I wondered aloud.

Hannah shook her head, watching the pair as they stepped up to a plinth and were instantly surrounded and concealed in a nimbus of emerald light.

"Come on," I said, leading her towards the next plinth.

"David, look…" I followed her gaze. Dortmund was stepping away from the plinth he'd approached perhaps fifteen seconds ago, the alien at his side. Without pause they moved onto the next stone and were absorbed in a ball of citrus light.

We stood and watched and twenty seconds later the pair emerged, only to hurry on to the next plinth.

"Strange…" Hannah said, more to herself than to me.

I shrugged. "Maybe that's all the time he needs to appreciate what the stones offer."

Hannah pulled a pretty frown. "That's not what's strange, David. What's odd is why, considering his disparagement of the exhibition, he should want to experience it at all?"

"Well, maybe he's not only a megalomaniac but a hypocrite as well."

We moved to a vacant plinth and stepped into a glow of brilliant white light.

For a timeless period we were bombarded by the emotion of love◦– alien love◦– which we found was very much like the terrestrial version. Two young Elan approached us, stared into our eyes, and communicated something of their feelings for each other; I was transported back to my youth, my first love, then to later life and my infatuation with my wife, and then Carlotta… I felt what the aliens felt for each other and drew appropriate correspondences from my own experience. I was overwhelmed, swept away with the heady, drugged euphoria of true love, and my senses were still reeling as we staggered from the plinth clutching each other.

"David," Hannah whispered, "let's not do any more. I need a drink. A strong one."

We left the dome and crossed to the bar overlooking the water.

I returned with drinks from the bar. Hannah was fanning herself. "Whew… that was quite something."

I gazed at her like a lovesick schoolboy. I could only nod.

I took her hand and gazed out to sea. What I felt for Hannah surprised me, considering the short time we had spent together. I knew what I'd felt for her before tonight's exhibition, but the experience of the last stone had done something to accelerate and emphasise those feelings. I counselled caution. I told myself to take it

easy; I did not want to suffer the grief that accompanied my last foray into romance… Which was ridiculous, of course, as there was no way my head could dictate to the desires of my heart.

I gathered from Hannah's silence, as we drank and stared at the sequinned play of the waves below, that she was similarly affected.

We looked at each other. At the same time we spoke each other's names, then laughed. I said, "I'm sorry. It's just… that was quite something back there. It's odd, I feel as if I've known you for months, years…"

She beamed with relief. "Thank God, David. Oh, I thought you were going to say you thought it was going too fast, that we need time to think about things." She stopped. "Oh, *shit*!" she hissed the last word with venom, and I followed the direction of her gaze.

Dortmund and his alien friend were crossing the patio towards us. The off-worlder was clutching his customary scotch, the alien a tumbler of juice. The pair paused before us and Dortmund nodded coldly.

"Allow me to introduce Fhen," he said. "Fhen, this is Lieutenant van Harben of the Mackinley police. And David Conway, the Opener of the Way…" He said this with something approaching a sneer.

The alien dipped on his bi-jointed legs. "I am pleased to meet you both. I have heard of you, David Conway."

I was looking at Dortmund. He was staring at Hannah and his eyes never left her face.

"Fhen is my… my aide," said Dortmund. "My guide to all things Elan."

The alien said, "We met when Mr Dortmund was on Epiphany three years ago."

"I went with the intention of experiencing the Epiphany Stones in their natural environment, untainted by…" Dortmund's long fingers flicked a dismissive gesture over his shoulder towards the dome, "by such meretricious human… interference."

"And what did you think?" I said.

The off-worlder shook his head. He was gazing out to sea now, perhaps aware that his attention to Hannah had been excessive. "To my great annoyance, I was not allowed access to the hallowed chambers."

Hannah said, "Hence your interest now? I thought it odd that you should show so much enthusiasm tonight, when last night you were so dismissive."

His gaze locked onto her again. "My criticism of a so-called work of art does not preclude my detailed study of it, Lieutenant."

Fhen said, "Matt Sommers has created something which humans might experience, though it cannot be said to rival the effect of the

stones in their natural setting."

"The very fact that humans are human", Dortmund said, "precludes their full understanding…"

I was about to say something along the lines that surely his understanding, being only human after all, would likewise be diminished, but Dortmund swept on, "Anyway, I am not here to discuss the pros and cons of the installation. For the period of my stay in Mackinley I have rented a villa in the hills overlooking the straits. I'm holding a little soirée there in a few days◦– details yet to be arranged◦– and I hope that you might attend. I promise", he went on, "not to discuss the installation."

Hannah did not flinch under his unwavering regard. She nodded. "That would be pleasant," she said. "Wouldn't it, David?"

I raised my glass in agreement.

Dortmund gave one of his rictus smiles, devoid of all sentiment. "Excellent. Fhen will be in touch with the details. Now," he said, "come, Fhen…" He nodded to me, inclined his head at Hannah, then turned on his heel and entered the dome, the Elan trotting faithfully after him.

Hannah watched him go, looking puzzled.

"Why the hell does he stare at you like that?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I wish I knew. I'd like to think it was just because he was an arrogant, overbearing man, but I don't know…"

We had one more drink, then left the exhibition centre and caught a cab. Outside her apartment in central Mackinley Hannah turned to me and said, "It's been a wonderful night, David. Thank you so much."

I reached out and took her hand. "Look… I hope you don't mind. I mean, if you're not doing anything this weekend, would you like to come up to Magenta? See the *Mantis*? I'll give you a guided tour."

Her smile expanded as I spoke and her eyes glowed. She said, almost before I'd finished, "Of course I would, David. That'd be great." She leaned forward, kissed my cheek, then slipped from the cab and hurried up the steps to her apartment.

I sank back into the seat as the cab carried me up the coast, smiling to myself all the way.

— FOUR —

I spent all Saturday morning cleaning the *Mantis*. I have my friends around roughly once a week for a meal and between times I let my domestic duties slip. That morning I scrubbed and cleaned, re-arranged the furniture several times, and even played half a dozen different music-needles on the ship's sound system◦– eventually selecting some mood jazz from one of the colonies. Afterwards I sat on the balcony with a beer and considered Hannah van Harben, slim and blonde and smiling in my mind's eye, and wondered if I were investing too much emotion in the relationship at this early stage.

There was a time, a few years ago, when I might have held back from getting too involved with a beautiful woman. But I had been on Chalcedony for more than seven years now, with only one intimate relationship to boast of.

That brought me up short. What had Darius Dortmund said, just the other day, about my being lonely…?

That train of thought was interrupted by the chime of my com. I answered, dreading that it might be Hannah calling with some excuse not to visit.

Maddie smiled out of the tiny screen. "David. We're going to the Jackeral for lunch today. Matt's managed to drag himself away from the exhibition. We were wondering if you'd like to join us?"

"Well… Hannah's coming up at midday. I'm not sure what we'll be doing. I'll see what she says."

Maddie beamed at me. "Play it by ear. Come if she'd like to. We'll be there around one."

I smiled. "I'll do that, Maddie."

"Hannah's a nice person, David. I hope it goes well."

"I'll second that. Catch you later."

I cut the connection and scanned the section of the coast road observable from the balcony.

Thirty minutes later a silver two-seater drove into view, pulled off the road and eased itself to a halt beside the *Mantis*.

I left the ship and was approaching the car when Hannah climbed out.

She held out her hands to me and I took them. We kissed cheeks, my heart racing, and I backed off and swept my arm in a gesture taking in the squat bulk of the starship. "Well, what do you think?"

"As beachside domiciles go, David, it's pretty damned striking. There was no mistaking it for any old villa when I came up the coast road. I like the colour scheme."

I'd recently had it repainted in the red and silver livery of the

Charlesworth Line. I told her this, and went on, “I often watched their ships take off and land at Vancouver spaceport.” I shrugged and slapped the ship’s flank. “This brings back memories. Anyway, come inside. I’ll show you around.”

We walked up the ramp and took the elevator to the second floor, which consisted of the bridge, now a lounge, a small kitchen and a couple of spacious bedrooms, which I guess had been the crew’s quarters back when the ship had flown between the stars.

She stood in the centre of the lounge and turned, wide-eyed. “David… why, this is magnificent. I love the décor.”

“All my own work,” I said. “Actually, that’s a lie. Maddie helped me out.”

On Maddie’s suggestion I’d repainted the bulkhead cream and the curving walls of the nose cone a pale jade; I’d hung the walls with tapestries and prints from all over the Expansion. A smoke sculpture from Yho, Betelgeuse III, played in one corner, and opposite stood a canted slab of emotion crystal, a gift from Matt.

Hannah tipped her head to one side, smiling her delicious, curved-lip smile. “Even the music’s wonderful. Isn’t it something from Tourmaline in Vega?”

“You like it? It’s among my favourites.”

“I love the stuff coming out of Tourmaline at the moment.”

We chatted about music for a while. I asked if she wanted a drink, and poured a couple of beers. We drank them on the balcony, looking out over the magenta sands and the calm circle of the bay.

She curled up on a recliner and smiled at me. “Tell me, David. How do you spend your time?”

Déjà vu…

Two years ago, Carlotta Chakravorti-Luna had asked me the very same question. I banished her ghost and answered, “I lead a simple life, Hannah. I walk, read, see my friends a lot.” I slapped my stomach. “I probably spend more time at the Jackeral than’s good for me.”

“A simple life’s good, David. That’s what I hope to find here.”

“I suspect it’ll be a bit quieter than Rotterdam, anyway.”

She nodded. “Much. Rotterdam was intense. Do you know how many murders there were on Chalcedony last year?”

I blew out my lips. “On the entire planet? The population’s what… ten million? I don’t know… Fifty?”

“Five,” Hannah said. “Five. Can you imagine that? There are fifty killings in Rotterdam alone every weekend.”

“No wonder you opted for the quiet life.” I paused, then said, “I just hope you don’t find it too quiet.”

She shook her head. “I never liked big cities. The coast here ha s

everything◦– great scenery, big-enough towns and cities, galleries and a thriving artists' community. And if the Jackeral is as good as you claim…"

"It's my spiritual home, Hannah. Speaking of which… Maddie called earlier. She and Matt and the others are having lunch there. I didn't know if you'd want to join them…?"

"Why not? That would be lovely. But afterwards, David, would you drive me into the hills and show me the falls?"

"I'd be delighted," I said, feeling just about as wonderful as it was possible to feel. "Right, I hope you have an appetite."

* * *

Matt and Maddie, Hawk and Kee were already at the Jackeral when we arrived. They'd claimed the corner table on the patio overlooking the bay and had started on the beer.

"David, Hannah," Matt said. "Great you could make it."

"Try keeping us away." I dragged up a couple of chairs. "We haven't been out as a group at the Jackeral for ages."

"That's my fault," Matt admitted to Hannah as she sat beside him. "I dragged Hawk and Kee off to Epiphany over a month ago."

Kee leaned forward, staring large-eyed at Hannah. Kee was in her thirties, but looked about fifteen. For the most part, Hawk's liaison with a member of the native aliens was accepted by humans and Ashentay alike; only the occasional off-world tourist had commented adversely.

Now Kee said, "But it was magnificent, Hannah! I think Chalcedony◦– or rather Ashent, as we call it◦– is beautiful, but then it is my planet, yes? But Epiphany might even be more beautiful."

"Then it must be some place," Hannah said.

I raised my glass. "To old friends," I said, and smiling at Hannah, "and to new. Cheers."

We drank, and Maddie fell into conversation with Hannah while I asked Matt how the exhibition was going. "We were there last night. Had to queue to get in."

"It's been the most popular thing I've done for years," he said. "It's just a pity that Dortmund's shown up."

Conversation around the table ceased at the sound of his name. "What is it with him?" I asked. "He was there again last night, sampling the stones for a few seconds then moving on."

Maddie said, "Apparently he's been doing that all day today too."

"Maybe", Hannah said, "despite his protestations he secretly admires the exhibition?"

Matt frowned. “I don’t know about that. He always was an odd character.”

I looked at him. “Always? This isn’t the first time you’ve met?”

Maddie flapped a hand, as if to say, *Don’t get him started on that subject!*

Matt sighed. “For my sins, I knew Darius Dortmund on Earth forty years ago. We were both students at Bonn Academy of Art.”

“He was an artist?” I said.

“Well, he thought he was. He had a certain… raw talent, let’s say.”

Hannah sipped her drink and asked, “What was he like, back then?”

Matt shrugged. “Similar in character: intolerant, prickly, a loner who thought everyone else lacked not only talent but intelligence. I’ll give him this◦– he always was intellectually gifted. He saw to the heart of everything; his conversation could be brilliant. But he lacked… let’s just say that he lacked… *heart*, for want of a better word. Spirit. Humanity.” Matt laughed. “He was a pessimist, when pessimism wasn’t the fashion. Space was opening up; new worlds, new races, new philosophies were being discovered◦– but Dortmund claimed that there was nothing new under the sun and that the truth, in every field, could be found in materialist reductionism.”

Hannah frowned, “But how does that tie in with his obsessive sampling of the Epiphany Stones?” She shrugged. “I don’t know, but he looked like a man in search of something.”

Matt gestured with his beer bottle. “I can’t answer that, Hannah. Maybe he’s changed, left his nihilistic materialism behind… but somehow I think not.”

Hawk asked the question on the tip of my tongue. “So what happened to him? I mean, there he was in Bonn, the death of the party, and then he becomes famous years later as… what did the media call him? An alien-empath? How did that happen?”

Matt laughed. “He dropped out of the Academy before the final year, and to be honest everyone was glad to see the back of him. Over the years since, I kept hearing about him◦– though never in art circles; he never made it as an artist. About five years after I left Bonn, I heard from a fellow student that he was working for the European government, troubleshooting on colony worlds where there were problems. Not long after that a friend said they’d bumped into him at the Paris Telemass station, just back from Meridian◦– but Dortmund was too wrapped up in himself to acknowledge the guy.”

Kee said, “But he wasn’t empathic then?”

“Not to my knowledge. I’ve heard he became augmented about ten years ago.”

“And how did that happen?” I said. “If reports in the media are to be believed—”

Matt held up a hand. “They’re not. He wasn’t bitten by a Lyran sand-devil, nor absorbed into the consciousness of some telepathic beast somewhere, then spat out. And he wasn’t taken over by an alien…”

“So what did happen?” Hannah wanted to know.

“He worked for Berlin as a troubleshooter. When the neuroscience of empathy came in, he was one of the first lined up for the cut. Some say he became even more nihilistic following the operation. Think about it◦– would you like to be privy to the workings of the human mind, and do it for a living? If you read the wrong sort of person again and again, the criminal, the insane, it’d be enough to turn anyone into a sociopath.”

“So he’s actually telepathic?” I asked.

Matt wobbled his beer bottle. “I’ve heard he’s what’s called an enhanced empath◦– he can read emotions, surface-level thoughts, stray mental emanations, but nothing deep or comprehensive.” He shrugged. “But that’s only what I’ve heard. Who knows?”

I said, “From the way he acts, he gives the impression of being a mind-reader…” I thought about his assessment of me the other day as lonely.

“That might just be acute intuition based on his empathy,” Maddie said,

Hawk grunted a laugh. “I don’t like the idea of the bastard reading my thoughts, I must admit.”

Matt said, “Around eight years ago the news broke that he’d brokered a peace deal between the colonists of Esperance and the hostile aliens there. I must admit that all the media adulation stuck in my craw. Call me shallow, if you like.”

“That’s a human reaction,” I said. “You don’t know how I felt when my ex-wife made a million from some art deal shortly before I moved here.” I laughed at the thought.

“What do you think he’s doing here, Matt?” Hawk said. “Has he come just to view the latest work of an old acquaintance?”

Matt shook his head, his brow buckled in thought. “I don’t know. I haven’t asked him, directly.”

Maddie clapped her hands and passed around the menus. “Enough of Dortmund!” she demanded. “Let’s think about our stomachs instead.”

Hannah ordered a local fish with braised Chalcedony salad, and I went for a winter bouillabaisse. Thirty minutes later we were eating in silence. I glanced at Hannah, to see if she was enjoying her meal. Her eyes grew huge above a forkful of vegetables; she had a magical way

of communicating her delight without using words.

"What do you think?"

"Mmm!" She mopped a spill of oil from her chin, laughing at her clumsiness. "Wonderful! It's great, David." She reached out and squeezed my fingers. "Thanks so much for inviting me."

I grinned adolescently. "My pleasure."

We were settling back, replete yet contemplating dessert, when Matt's com chimed. He excused himself and took the call, standing by the balcony rail and staring out across the waters of the bay.

He stiffened, his brow furrowing. I heard a fraught, "What? What the hell…"

He moved away from the rail, more to work off frustration by striding back and forth, I guessed, than from the desire not to be overheard. A hurried conversation ensued. Mild-mannered so much of the time, he seemed animated and angered now.

Maddie was watching, her expression concerned.

A minute later Matt returned to the table. "I'm sorry. You'll have to excuse me. There's been some trouble down at the exhibition—"

Maddie stood and touched his arm. "Trouble?"

Matt shrugged. "Something about the power supply to the stones◦– at least, I hope it's that. I'd better get down there and sort it out."

"I'll come with you," Maddie said.

Matt kissed her forehead. "Thanks, but there's nothing you can do. Stay here and enjoy yourself. I'll be back in an hour or so, okay?"

She consented, but with obvious displeasure. As Matt hurried from the patio and made for his hover-car in the lot, we debated ordering desserts. In the end only Kee went for something sweet; the rest of us opted for beer.

I smiled at Hannah. I wondered if she detected my sadness. I often have this feeling when good friends are called away from the group, or cannot make it to a gathering: a kind of minor-key melancholy at their absence. I suppose it was because for too many years I had not enjoyed the amity of such a close-knit group of friends.

Conversation turned to other things. Kee asked Hannah how she was liking life on Chalcedony. She said she loved the slow pace of life, and how friendly people here were…

I was the first to notice the arrival of the long white limousine. It was a hired vehicle◦– a chauffeur with a peaked cap was at the wheel◦– and two figures sat in the back seat. The limousine pulled off the coast road and glided to a halt beside the Jackeral, perhaps fifty metres away.

"Hello," I said. "I think we have company."

As I spoke, a small, blue-furred figure opened the vehicle's rear

door. The Elan's feet didn't touch the ground as he turned on his seat, and he had to jump the last few inches to the tarmac.

The alien approached the restaurant patio, clutching something rectangular and silver in his tiny hand.

"It's Fhen," I said. "Dortmund's aide."

I looked back at the car and as I did so the remaining figure in the back seat leaned towards the window and stared out. It was Dortmund himself.

The Elan stepped onto the patio and approached our table. A silence fell as the other diners stopped eating and stared at the alien.

His long, thin lips were stretched in an imitation of a human smile. "Friends," he said in his fluting voice. "Mr Dortmund instructed me to give you this. A formal invitation."

He passed the envelope to Maddie, who was closest to the alien, and she opened it. "Darius Dortmund", she read, "extends an invitation to Mr Matt Sommers and friends to attend a Sunday Soirée at Ocean Heights, beginning at two tomorrow." She looked around at us. "The invitation extends to staying the night. Well," she went on, smiling at the alien. "Isn't that nice? I'm sure Matt will be delighted." I smiled at the irony in her tone. "Matt and I will be going◦– how about the rest of you?" Blindside of the Elan, she put on a comically pleading face.

I looked at Hannah, who nodded. "We'd love to," she said.

"Hawk, Kee?" Maddie prompted.

"Well, seeing as the rest of you…" Hawk began.

"Excellent," Maddie said, and turned to the waiting alien. "Please tell Mr Dortmund that we'll be delighted to come."

The alien performed an odd little bow and hurried back to the limousine. He climbed into the back seat and relayed our acceptance; a second later Dortmund leaned towards the window and gave an effete wave.

Moments later the limousine wafted away.

Hawk suggested another round of beers but I declined the offer. "I promised Hannah a trip to see the waterfalls," I said. "See you all tomorrow. I just hope Dortmund's hospitality extends to lavishing us with plenty of alcohol."

Hannah hit my shoulder as we moved away from the table.

* * *

I drove through the foothills of the inland mountains, heading south-east out of Magenta Bay towards Mackinley. Half an hour later we had climbed to four thousand feet and beside me Hannah gasped

as she looked to her right at the precipitous fall of the land towards the straits.

"Oh, David, it's so beautiful!"

"Wait till you see the falls and the lagoons."

She leaned her head on my shoulder as I took the looping bends, heading ever higher. Ten minutes later I turned off the main road, which would have led, eventually, through the mountains towards the golden column, and took a twisty minor road south.

Minutes later the silver and crystal townscape of Mackinley came into view far below, hugging the scalloped coastline. To our left a great silver waterfall tipped itself into a circular lagoon, the spray scintillating in the sunlight.

The overflow from the lagoon fed into a smaller, rock-encircled lagoon beneath, and it was to this lagoon that I was taking Hannah. I parked the car beside the waterfall, took her hand and led her through a thicket of greenberries, down a precipitous slope, and around a shola tree to the calm, quiet lower lagoon.

Hannah gasped. "It's… Oh, it's idyllic, David."

She stood at the edge of the escarpment, where this lagoon overflowed into the one below, and so on until they reached the coast. Below us several villas owned by the planet's seriously rich◦– holo stars and politicians◦– nestled behind stands of shola trees.

Hannah pointed. "Isn't that the place where Dortmund is staying?"

I made out a terracotta tiled villa in extensive lawned grounds, complete with swimming pools, tennis courts and a skyball pitch.

"I read that he'd taken the place for a month," she said. "There was a picture of the villa in the paper. And look, it seems he's getting ready for the soirée."

I laughed. "Well, his flunkies are." A dozen liveried servants were erecting a silver mylar marquee on the front lawn and setting up laser barbecue pits nearby. Others were arranging trestle tables before the villa's open French windows.

"Looks like he's planning some do," I said.

Hannah walked to the water's edge, knelt and peered into the brimming depths. "Hey, there are little fish here."

I joined her. The water boiled with tiny darting slivers of silver. "They're called picayne. They nibble dead skin and dirt from you◦– Chalcedony's own natural cleaning agent."

"Well, I think I'll have a little dip," she laughed.

"But you haven't brought a…"

But she was already stripping off. In seconds she was naked and dancing with high-steps into the lagoon. My heart thudding, I stared at her startling nakedness, her slim back, her perfect bottom.

Knee-deep in the water, she turned and smiled at me. “What’s wrong, David? You never seen a naked lady before? Take off your clothes and come in!”

She smiled and held out her arms.

— FIVE —

That weekend was a period of blissful happiness. A wonderful woman had miraculously fallen into my lap and I was surrounded by true friends; there was nothing to suggest that the halcyon days should not go on forever.

Hannah stayed over at the *Mantis* with me on the Saturday evening and we slept late on Sunday morning, slumbering in each others arms as the sun slanted in through the dorsal viewscreen. I was constantly on the verge of laughing out loud at my good fortune, and I could tell that Hannah was pretty damned happy too.

I cooked a late breakfast and we ate on the balcony overlooking the beach and watched the world go by.

Around noon we set off for Dortmund's villa, Ocean Heights, stopping off at Hannah's apartment in Mackinley so that she could change and pack an overnight bag.

As I drove from the town and into the hills, Hannah curled beside me and said, "I wonder why Dortmund's throwing the party? It seems out of character. He's been the personification of cold since we met him, and now he's invited us to what looks like being a lavish do."

I smiled at her. Wind whipped at her blonde hair, and her green eyes twinkled at me. "Maybe it's to do with his ego," I suggested. "He's not bothered about us having a good time and enjoying ourselves◦– all the reasons you normally throw a party. He wants to put on a show to prove that he can do it, that he has the money and the wherewithal."

She tapped my arm with a long finger. "Or maybe you're too nice a person to divine his true motives?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, he's invited us so that we'll all be together when he performs some stunning and malicious party trick, proving himself right and the rest of us wrong…"

"You mean something regarding Matt's exhibition?"

She shrugged. "It's only a thought. Considering what I know of Dortmund, and judging by his behaviour so far, I don't think we're in for a particularly relaxing stay."

"Well, we'll soon find out," I said, keeping my eyes on the road ahead and wondering if Hannah's astute psychological insight would be proved correct by the time we made our way home on Monday morning.

Approached from the road, Ocean Heights seemed an even grander abode than when we had seen it from the falls yesterday. It was surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, as anachronistic as it was

ugly, and patrolled by security guards. A dozen pitched terracotta roofs showed above the surrounding shola trees and fountains played prismatically over immaculately groomed lawns.

A surly-looking brute scanned our retinas with a handheld device, somehow elucidated we were on the guest list, and activated the swing gates. We drove into the grounds and left the car among a phalanx of other, grander vehicles.

Hannah took my hand and said suddenly, “I’m very happy, Mr Conway.”

I smiled. “Me too!”

We strolled along a winding path through a plantation of alien shrubs, artfully designed so that the last bend of the path brought the visitor into sudden view of the villa, blindingly white against sprays of azure herbage.

Guests milled, tended to by circulating waiters with trays. I guessed there were about fifty people on the lawn, the great and the good of the colony and a number of off-worlders, artists and art critics I recognised from Matt’s opening night.

Among the crowd were the Elan: Heanor the Ambassador and the older alien, Fhen. They mingled with the guests, bobbing oddly on the sprung suspension of their bi-jointed legs and making elaborate gestures with their long arms.

Of our host, Darius Dortmund, there was no sign.

The mylar marquee at the far end of the lawn was open on two sides, allowing a through breeze but affording shade from the afternoon sun. Tables had been set up inside, laden with plates and bowls of food; I saw Hawk and Kee standing in the shade, eating.

A passing waiter offered drinks so we took glasses of sparkling white wine and crossed to our friends.

“Any sign of Matt and Maddie?” I asked.

“We’ve just got here ourselves,” Hawk said.

Hannah asked, “Have you heard anything from Matt about the problem at the exhibition?”

“I called Maddie this morning,” Hawk said. “Matt spent the night at the exhibition centre, trying to iron things out. She didn’t say what was wrong, but she did say that she and Matt would be here.”

Kee clapped her hands, beaming at us. “Would you like a tour of the desert garden?” she asked. “Many years ago, when we were young, we’d sneak into the grounds and play among the dry flowers. Many of them are sacred to us. Come, I’ll show you.”

We left the shade of the marquee and crossed the lawn, walking around the villa to the stepped terraces beyond. We climbed a series of crazy, switchback steps and came at last to a small garden enclosed by a waist-high wall.

Bizarre, spiked vegetation proliferated within, vaguely cactus-like but sporting coloured leaves and flamboyant blooms. Not one of them was smaller than Hawk, who is tall, and as we strolled past I noticed that each had its own distinctive scent: not the sweet fragrances of terrestrial blooms, but wholly alien, scents that I found hard to describe, but tried: hot engine oil mixed with cayenne pepper, waxed leather with an overlay of aniseed.

We had the garden to ourselves. Kee gave a running commentary on the plants, pronouncing their alien names and telling us which ones were revered in Ashentay lore for their healing properties.

She stopped before a thin, tall plant. It was blue and looked like a sculpture of twisted metal with a series of barbs which sprouted from its central stem, hooked and cruel like oriental daggers.

"This is the hleth bush," Kee said in almost a whisper. "Many millennia ago, Kayanth, who was an evil man, was killed by a young man called Hleth. He used one of these spikes to kill Kayanth, and so saved his people from slavery."

She flicked a barb with a tiny finger, and smiled. "At a certain time of year, the hleth shed these spikes if pressed like this…" She applied pressure to the underside of the metallic-looking barb, forcing it upwards, and suddenly it sprang into the air and fell to the ground. I almost expected to hear it rattle on impact.

Laughing, Kee ducked and retrieved it. She held the dagger to her lips and whispered something, then tucked it into her belt. "It is considered good luck if the spike comes off easily." She beamed at us. "Now we will all have good fortune in the days ahead!"

Hawk leaned down and kissed the head of his alien lover, and we continued our stroll.

We were passing from the garden, rounding a trumpet-bloomed bush, when we came upon our host.

He was arguing with his alien aide, Fhen. When he saw us he stopped mid-sentence and gave his limited, rictus smile. "Ah, I see you have sampled the strange wonders of the dry garden. And you have been regaling your friends with tales from your history, Kee?" His gaze merely flicked at her before alighting on the hleth barb at her waist. "I trust you will be careful with it, my dear. We wouldn't want whatever good luck it brought your way to be tempered by the misfortune of an accident, would we?"

Almost inevitably, Dortmund's eyes alighted on Hannah and he smiled his sickly smile, almost a parody of affection. "And you, my dear, are still wearing your… gemstone, though I see it is now in a different setting." I glanced at Hannah as she self-consciously fingered the brooch at her breast. It resembled the choker she had worn yesterday, an emerald green stone set in filigreed silver.

"I often think," he went on cryptically, "that such ornamentation conceals as much as it reveals, don't you?"

Hannah stared at him. "Meaning?"

Dortmund laughed. "I think you know what I mean, Lieutenant," he said. He inclined his head to us. "Hawksworth, Conway… Do excuse me. I have a few details to settle with Fhen. I will join the party presently."

He swept on into the garden, leaving us staring after him.

I looked at Hannah. "What was all that 'I think you know what I mean' business?"

Hannah played nervously with her brooch. "I don't know. He gives me the creeps." She shivered. "Come on, I need another drink."

We hurried around the house to the now busy front lawn.

* * *

We replenished our glasses and mingled with the other guests, chatting to acquaintances from Mackinley and Magenta Bay. It was the kind of occasion I enjoyed: easy and informal, with the chance to meet people I hadn't seen for a while and catch up with the trivial events of the colony.

Hannah said at one point, "You know so many people!"

"Well, without wanting to sound big-headed, everyone wanted to know me after the opening of the way."

She punched my arm playfully.

Hawk observed, "I see Dortmund has deigned to join the party," indicating the off-worlder with his glass. The tall, white-suited Dortmund was moving from group to group across the lawn, the very epitome of the conscientious host, listening with his head inclined thoughtfully, a tolerant smile on his thin lips. I watched him as he attended to what his guests had to say then rejoined with some witty quip which left them laughing, before he moved on.

As we wandered across the lawn, I heard the comments of those blessed by his wit, "So brilliant. How does he do it? I thought I knew all there was to know about…"

Hawk leaned towards me and whispered, "The man's a conniving charlatan, David."

At one end of the lawn, a small orchestra were setting up their instruments; they proceeded to play a selection of modern classics. At the opposite end, closest to the villa, a smaller band played mood jazz. We gravitated towards the latter, refreshed our glasses, sat down and listened.

At one point the Elan Fhen bobbed past and smiled at us. I

waved. “Would you care to join us?”

The alien paused comically, as if torn between continuing on his way and being seen as rude, or accepting my offer. The dilemma took a few seconds to resolve. He carved a semi-circle in the air with his long right arm, evidently some extraterrestrial affirmative. Finally he crossed to us and lowered himself onto the grass, an elaborate and lengthy process involving the slow folding of multiple knee joints.

“Very kind of you,” he said, raising his glass of juice towards us.

I said, “How long have you been working for Mr Dortmund, Fhen?”

Fhen considered the question for longer than seemed appropriate, then replied, “I first met Darius Dortmund on Epiphany, three Terran years ago. He hired me as a guide. He requested that we travel to the sacred continent and attempt an audience with the Epiphany Stones.”

“Why did Dortmund want an audience with the stones?” Kee asked.

Again the delay before Fhen spoke, “Knowledge. Darius Dortmund’s motivation in everything he does is solely the acquisition of knowledge.”

“So when Matt announced the exhibition, Dortmund must have been…” I considered whether to say pleased that he would at last be able to commune with the stones, or put out that someone else had managed the coup of bringing the stones to the universe at large.

Fhen explained, “When Mr Dortmund heard about the exhibition and expressed his intention of attending, I contacted him and offered my services as his aide, as I had the confidence of the Ambassador.”

“But why would Dortmund need an aide, Fhen?” Hawk asked.

“It was judged wise that he should be… accompanied,” Fhen said.

I said, “Can you tell us why?”

Fhen hesitated, blinking his massive eyes. “It was the wish of the Ambassador.”

Curiouser and curiouser.

Next to me, Hannah pointed, “Here’s Matt and Maddie…” I followed the direction of her finger and saw the pair step across the lawn, accompanied by the Elan Ambassador, who was in deep discussion with Matt.

Fhen rose slowly, his legs seeming to telescope as he reached his full height. “It has been a pleasure conversing with you,” he said, and moved off.

The Ambassador left Matt and Maddie and stepped into the crowd. Our friends looked around, saw us and hurried over.

They grabbed drinks on the way and collapsed beside us. Maddie said, “I was about to drive down to Mackinley myself and drag him up here.”

“Everything okay with the exhibition?” Hannah wanted to know.

Matt took a sip of wine and wiped his lips. “Well, it’s not as bad as I feared.”

“What happened?” Hawk asked.

Matt shook his head. “Wish I knew. Yesterday a few people complained that the stones seemed to be losing their effect, becoming weaker. We actually closed the exhibition down for a couple of hours and checked everything.”

“And?” Kee said.

“Just over half the stones did seem to be diminished,” Matt said. “It wasn’t a technical fault. The mechanical side of things were working fine.”

“So?” I prompted.

“Apparently this… fading… isn’t uncommon on Epiphany when the stones have undergone what’s called heavy communion. So we’re monitoring things and limiting the opening times.”

I detected, from having known Matt over the years, that he was being economical with the truth, holding something back. I didn’t press him.

“Anyway, I just want to forget the exhibition for a while, sit back and enjoy myself.” He smiled. “Hannah, great to see you again. David treating you well?”

She smiled and took my hand. “We drove to the falls yesterday,” she said, “and David showed me all the sights.” We exchanged a complicit glance.

Kee piped up, “And today I showed everyone around the dry garden, Matt. And look, a hleth spike. I told the story.”

Matt asked to see the murderous barb and examined its spike. “Ouch,” he said, having tested its point on the ball of his thumb.

Kee laughed as she tucked the spike back into her belt. “My people say when you draw blood with the hleth spike, you bring yourself extra-special luck.”

Matt laughed, licking the tiny jewel of blood beading on the end of his thumb. “Let’s hope you’re right, Kee.”

We chatted as the sinuous mood music wound around us and the sun moved slowly through the sky towards the oceanic horizon. At one point waiters circulated with plates of barbecued food, the scent of cooked meats permeating the lawn. We ate, still seated, enjoying the luxury of being waited on at the expense of the off-worlder.

Later, as the sun went down and a relative chill came on with the night breeze, Dortmund threw open the French windows to a comfortable lounge and invited us inside. By now the catering pantechnicons had loaded up and left, and along with them the platoon of waiters and the orchestras. The majority of guests had

departed too, leaving only our group, Ambassador Heanor, Fhen and Dortmund to enter the lounge and take the sumptuous armchairs arranged around an imitation log fire.

The off-worlder himself poured whiskies and beers, then sat in an armchair more like a throne with what looked like a quadruple scotch in a cut-glass tumbler.

From something in his demeanour, his air of ostentatious haughtiness, I gained the impression that he was about to hold forth.

I wasn't wrong.

"I have", he began, "come a long way since we were students together in Bonn, Matt."

Matt raised his glass in ironic salute. "About twenty light years, I'd say, Dortmund."

The off-worlder's lips stretched, but the movement could not be described as a smile. "Quite. You always did have a rapier wit."

The Ambassador leaned forward. "A long way, Mr Dortmund? The meaning of the expression eludes me."

"I mean", Dortmund said, "that I have achieved more in my lifetime than I◦– and I dare say my acquaintances◦– thought possible. Isn't that right, Matt?"

Mat pursed his lips, considering his reply. "I would think, Dortmund, that in artistic terms you've come about as far as I, at least, expected."

I could not help but smile to myself, and cast a quick glance at Maddie. She grinned at me. In Matt, Dortmund was picking the wrong victim to bait: the artist might have been laid-back and mild-mannered, but his mind was as sharp as the hleth barb, a lethal combination when allied to his manifest dislike of the off-worlder.

"I was not," Dortmund continued, "referring to artistic endeavour." He pursed his lips around a large mouthful of whisky and glanced at each of us in turn. "As far as I'm concerned, artistic achievement is limited to the narrow range of human consciousness, circumscribed by the limited perceptions of the human mind."

Matt gestured with his glass. "Limited it might be, but it's all we have with which to make sense of the universe we inhabit. Which isn't to say that science doesn't fulfil the same purpose, but both are bound◦– as you say◦– by the limits of our perceptions."

Dortmund smiled, like an alligator knowing it had snared prey. "And what would you say if I claimed that there are ways and means of transcending paltry human consciousness and attaining some measure of universal knowledge?"

Matt paused, staring at his beer. A fraught tension filled the air. I know that I, for one, feared that Matt had talked himself into a corner. I guessed where Dortmund was leading, and I didn't like it a bit.

Matt's reply though, when it came, was brilliant. "I don't doubt for a minute that you think you have gained some superior powers of perception, Dortmund. But what facilitated that leap of perception did not in any essence originate within you– it was through the psionic processes granted you by your government: a machine-enhancement, if you like. Also," he swept on, "a superior perception you might claim for yourself, but when all is said and done, what is an exalted perception if it doesn't lead to some result, some breakthrough or insight, either artistic or scientific, which might be communicated to an audience who would thus be enlightened or educated by one's insights?"

"Very clever, Sommers, very articulate. But your diagnosis pre-empts my eventual breakthrough."

Matt laughed at this, mocking. "Dortmund, you sound just like your twenty-year-old self, always making great claims never to be substantiated."

Dortmund finished his scotch in one gulp, reached out with an unsteady hand and poured himself another.

"If I could only have you apprehend what I have experienced", he said, "and achieved…"

The Ambassador, either wishing to calm the waters, or ignorant of the tension in the air, asked, "And what are those achievements, Mr Dortmund?"

The off-worlder performed his imitation smile again. "For the past ten, twelve years I have travelled the Expansion", he said, "and even beyond. I have communed with all manner of sentient life; I have striven to understand even the most alien, the most incomprehensible, to understand the effects which brought about their sentience and behaviour, and so gain some empathy with the consciousness of a hundred different extraterrestrial species."

A silence greeted this megalomaniacal, and somewhat drunken, pronouncement.

I said, "And what would you say that has gained you, other than the gradual disenfranchisement from the understanding and sympathy of… of your fellow human beings?" I think I was a little drunk myself by then, drunk and vindictive, I admit.

Dortmund surprised me by laughing at that. "Well, it has brought about that, I admit, Conway. But it has also brought me many insights and… abilities," he went on, taking a huge swallow of scotch.

The Ambassador wanted to know, "Abilities?"

Dortmund looked around. At last he pointed, surprising me. His unsteady forefinger indicated Kee, who stared at him wide-eyed.

"Girl! That… that barb, that hleth spike, as you call it. Here!"

Kee looked around like a child accused of cheating by a teacher.

“What?”

Dortmund leaned forward, and spoke as if to an idiot. “Take the damned barb from your belt and lay it upon the table!”

Kee looked worried. She glanced across at Hawk, who nodded.

She slipped the barb from her belt and did as instructed. It sat upon the mahogany inlay of the coffee table, its curved length catching the glow of the fire.

We stared at the barb, and then at Dortmund.

“Now, watch!”

He leaned forward, staring intently at the barb. A minute passed, and nothing happened. We looked at each other, mentally shrugging; I wanted to laugh at the sight of the effort on Dortmund’s face, but restrained myself.

Matt broke the silence. “Just what”, he said, “are you trying to do?”

Without taking his eyes from the barb, Dortmund said, “You doubted my abilities. I’ll show you. I learned this from a race of sentient cetaceans on Acrab IV. Telekinesis◦– regarded impossible by human science… but watch!”

We watched. A minute became two, then three. We were getting fidgety when, without warning, the barb twitched slightly.

Matt said stifling a yawn, “Impressive, Dortmund.”

“But look!” Kee said, pointing.

Suddenly the barb flipped, flew through the air at incredible speed and embedded itself in the timber surround of the fireplace with a resounding thunk.

A silence, followed by, “I must admit that’s a very impressive party trick, Dortmund.” Matt concealed a smile behind his glass.

The off-worlder collapsed back into his armchair, glaring out at us. “Christ, how I despise you all!” he spat. “All of you. Sommers◦– with your self-satisfied air of the Expansion-renowned artist, a mere dabbler in the shallow and the trite, and the hangers-on you call your friends. You, Maddie Chamberlain, hiding your insecurities behind a puppy-like love for this charlatan, giving the world the impression of hard-won experience to cover the fear that you’ll be thought of as intellectually lacking, which you are.”

“That’s enough!” Matt said.

But Dortmund swept on, “And Hawk and Kee. What can I say about the most incompatible pair of losers on the planet? The failed pilot who killed his passengers and gained a fake redemption with the fortuitous intervention of the Yall… And Kee◦– you’re contemptible with your dependencies on Hawk the father figure to compensate for the rejection by your own people.”

He barked a laugh and turned his attention to me. Hannah

reached out from her armchair, gripping my hand.

"David Conway," Dortmund said, with a sadistic leer. "In many ways, you're the saddest of all… Your running away from attempting to save your daughter set the psychological template for everything that followed: your running away from your wife, from Earth, from the responsibilities of relationships… which will inevitably founder on your guilt and a concomitant inability to commit."

I balled a fist, ready to leap at him, but Hannah restrained me with a look.

Dortmund stared at Hannah, then, and went on, "And last, but not least, we come to Lieutenant Hannah van Harben who, on the face of it, appears so very sweet and innocent, Conway's perfect lover, who despite whatever you've told Conway to lure him in is living a lie, a lie hiding… what? What are you hiding, Lieutenant?"

I stood up. "I've had enough of you cheap psychology, Dortmund."

He turned away, staring without expression at the faux flames of the fireplace.

The Ambassador rose, gestured inexplicably and hurried from the room. Maddie moved to Matt, who hugged her and led her from the room, followed by Hawk and Kee. I took Hannah's hand, drawing her to me. I kissed her and whispered, "Don't cry. Come on…"

I led her from the room. Fhen hurried after us. "If you would still like to stay the night, I will show you to your respective bedrooms."

Hawk said, "I'm too drunk to drive."

Matt nodded. "Me too. Let's stay, then get the hell out first thing."

I nodded, watching them move off, subdued, up the sweeping staircase.

"David…" Hannah said, drawing me towards stairs.

"Give me a minute, Hannah, okay? I'm not going to let the bastard get away with…"

Before she could protest, I slipped back into the lounge, eased the door shut behind me and crossed to Dortmund in his armchair.

He became aware of me after a second and looked up drunkenly. "What do you want, Conway?"

I controlled my anger. I took a breath and said, "I just wanted to say that I hope you're proud of yourself, Dortmund. That was very clever– using your ability to dissect us like that. Very clever, and very indicative of the man you are: egotistical, monomaniacal, and without a soul in the world who cares a damn about you."

I looked at the barb protruding from the timber of the fireplace, gathering my thoughts. "And some of what you said might contain a grain of truth. But so what? No one is perfect. We live with our strengths, our weaknesses and imperfections– and we do our best

with what fate has given us. It's called being human◦– to try your best, and fail, and to go on despite everything… But perhaps you've forgotten what it's like to be human, Dortmund."

I stood over him, willing him to look at me, wanting to see in his gaze an admission that what I had said had penetrated to his heart, if he possessed a heart.

He looked up, his ice-blue eyes unremittingly cold, and his expression mocked every word I had spoken.

* * *

Our bedroom overlooked the front lawn.

The balcony doors were open, admitting a slight breeze. Hannah had slipped into bed and turned out the lights; the room was illuminated by the silver light from the Ring of Tharssos.

I stood by the balcony doors, staring out at the parabola of the Ring as it diminished over the sea's horizon.

"Come to bed," Hannah said sleepily.

I undressed and slipped under the cool sheets beside her. "Hannah…?" I began.

She pressed a finger to my lips. "Shhh," she said. "Hold me, David."

I held her, and she kissed me, and we made love, slowly. I swear it was the most intimate and meaningful of all the times we had made love up to then. I collapsed beside her, exhausted, tracing a finger across her chest and belly and considering my words.

"Hannah?" I said. She was silent, so I said again, "Hannah…"

The even sound of her respiration, the shallow rise and fall of her chest in the ring-light, told me she was sleeping.

I lay awake for a long time, considering Dortmund's final tirade. I dismissed a lot of what he'd said as no more than vindictiveness: there might have been a kernel of truth in some of his insights, but they were exaggerated out of all recognition.

What he'd said about Hannah, however, made me wonder. It was almost as if he were unable to discern the workings of her mind, for some reason, and therefore accused her of concealment. Then I recalled what he'd said earlier about her gemstone…

I must have fallen asleep eventually, as I awoke some time later with a pressing

need to visit the loo. On the way back from the en suite bathroom, I moved to the open doors and looked out. The far-away straits were silvered with ring-light and the land was black with night; the scene resembled an old-fashioned photographic negative.

I was about to return to bed when I noticed movement down below. I stepped forward and peered. Hawk, fully dressed, crossed the patio and leaned against the stone balustrade, staring across the lawn.

I wondered if he, too, was finding sleep hard in the aftermath of Dortmund's petty invective.

I stepped inside, locked the doors, returned to bed and eventually slept.

At some point I woke again, disturbed by Hannah as she rolled out of bed. Dawn light filled the room. I dozed in that realm between sleep and wakefulness when lucid dreams take on the fidelity of reality. I saw Hannah waving goodbye, tearfully, as she moved ever further away from me.

I woke up and reached out. The bed was empty.

When she returned, at last, I pulled her to me and hugged her like a needful child.

Later◦– and it must have been an hour or two at least, as full sunlight now exploded into the room◦– we were awoken by an insistent knocking on the door.

I came awake slowly, rolled out of bed and pulled on some clothes.

Maddie and Matt stood side by side in the passageway when I opened the door. They wore the blank, anaesthetised expressions of people in shock.

"What?" I said

"It's Dortmund," Maddie said at last.

"Dortmund?"

She nodded. "He's dead."

— SIX —

Hannah joined me and we made our way downstairs. Hawk and Kee were already there, standing beside the open door to the lounge. They were holding hands and staring silently into the room. The Ambassador, Heanor, was beside them, peering into the lounge.

I said, "What happened? Who found him?"

"I did, Mr Conway," Heanor said. "I rose early, as is my custom. The door was open. When I looked in, I saw…"

I looked into the room.

Dortmund was slumped forward in his armchair, the front of his white suit stained black.

I led the way into the room. Hannah reached out to me. "Be careful. Don't touch anything. Has anyone called the police?"

Maddie nodded. "As soon as Heanor woke us," she said. "I contacted your people in Mackinley. They said they'd have a team up here in ten minutes."

I stopped beside Dortmund's chair, in exactly the same position as when I'd stood over him the night before.

From his chest projected the hleth barb. I looked up, staring around at the shocked expressions of my friends. "Who the hell could have done this?" I said.

Hawk held my gaze. "After what the bastard said last night," he said, "any one of us."

I found myself laughing, more with macabre fear than humour. "I must admit I felt like—"

Hannah said, "We all did, at some point. But I don't think any of you would…" She stopped, then said, "Where's Fhen?"

I looked at the Ambassador, as if he might know the whereabouts of his compatriot.

"He was not in his room when I went to find him," Heanor said. He carved a gesture. "But you cannot be imputing…?" he said, staring at Hannah. "The taking of life, even alien life, is proscribed on my homeworld."

"But we're not on your homeworld," I pointed out.

The alien blinked with what looked like very human surprise, but for all I knew might have indicated intense hatred. He said, "Forgive my grasp of your language, Mr Conway. What I intended to mean was that on my world, murder is proscribed. We Elan do not kill anything."

I said, "Then it's either one of us, or someone who entered the house during the night."

The Elan said, "The latter is impossible, Mr Conway. All the

exterior doors are locked, and the windows likewise."

I recalled seeing Hawk on the patio: perhaps he'd left the door open when he returned inside, unwittingly allowing the killer into the building?

He caught my glance and said, "I stepped out for a breath of air around four this morning. I was out there perhaps ten minutes, the door open behind me. I didn't see anyone enter, and I locked the door when I came back inside."

Maddie said, wide-eyed and incredulous, "So if it wasn't Fhen, then…"

"Then it must have been one of us," Hannah finished.

I experienced a sickening sensation in my chest, like nausea.

The ensuing silence was interrupted by the diminuendo of a jet engine as a police flier came down on the front lawn. I guessed I was not alone in feeling relief, and not a little apprehension, at their arrival.

Hannah let the team into the house and explained the situation. We were ushered from the lounge and kept in an adjacent room, under the watchful eye of a uniformed officer, while the scene-of-crime team moved into the lounge and set up their apparatus.

"So what happens now?" I asked.

Hannah said, "We'll be questioned individually. I suspect we'll be released then, with binding conditions, and asked to report to the Mackinley police HQ until the investigation is closed."

I looked around at my friends, unable to believe that any one of them would have killed Dortmund, no matter how strong the provocation.

Matt and Maddie stood by the window in murmured conversation. Hawk stood before a shelf of old-fashioned books, scanning the titles, while Kee sat cross-legged on the floor, head bowed, eyes closed.

The Elan Ambassador sat on a chesterfield by the window, upright and silent.

Hannah curled beside me on a lounger, holding my hand. "I don't believe this," I said. "I curse the day the bastard set foot on Chalcedony." I laughed bitterly. "And to be honest, I don't feel one iota of regret about his death."

She squeezed my fingers. "For what it's worth, David, nor do I. Dortmund was a bastard." She shook her head. "Anyway, for all the Elan's protestations that his people don't kill, I suspect that Fhen did it."

The door opened and the investigating officer showed his head. "Lieutenant van Harben?"

She rose and left the room with the officer. She was gone perhaps

twenty minutes, and when she returned I had no time to ask about the interrogation. “Mr David Conway, if you’d care to come with me…”

The interview was conducted in a sunlit front room, with three officers and a recording device present. This was the first time I’d been so much as spoken to by investigating officers, and I felt an odd sense of guilt◦– especially when it emerged that I was the last person among all the guests last night to see Darius Dortmund alive.

“And did you or anyone else present have any reason to wish Mr Dortmund dead?”

I stared at the array of monitoring devices aimed my way. The question was so crass that I could only assume it was intentionally so, in the hope that the monitors would pick up something incriminating in my response.

I said, honestly, “None of my friends had any reason to kill Dortmund.”

“And the alien, Fhen?”

“What about him?”

“Is it true that Dortmund and Fhen were seen arguing yesterday?”

I nodded. “That’s right…”

“Do you know what they were arguing about, Mr Conway?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry…”

“When was the last time you saw the alien, Fhen?”

“That would be when I left the lounge and Fhen showed me to my room, just after midnight.”

The officer looked me in the eye and asked, “And was Dortmund alive when you left the room, Mr Conway?”

I returned his stare. “He was.”

The officer nodded, murmured something to a colleague, and I was escorted back to the library.

For the next couple of hours, the police questioned each of us in turn. A sergeant brought refreshments into the room and we were allowed escorted toilet breaks. I felt like a suspect in a classic murder mystery.

A second police flier landed on the lawn towards the end of the interrogation period, and the last of us to have been questioned, the Ambassador, was returned to the room. The investigating officer said, “Lieutenant, if you’ve a minute?”

With a glance at me, Hannah slipped from the room.

She was back five minutes later, accompanied by the officer. “Right,” he said. “That will be all, for now. You are free to leave. For the time being◦– that is, for the period of the next week◦– I’d be obliged if you would remain on Chalcedony and report to the Mackinley police HQ every other day. I advise that you all hire lawyers. Ambassador,” the officer went on, “I’d be obliged if you

would come with me…"

Hannah took my hand and we hurried from the villa.

We gathered in the parking lot. I said, "What did they want with Heanor?"

"That second flier," Hannah said. "It was an officer sent to check at the Telemass station. Apparently, Fhen took the early morning transmission from Mackinley, bound for Proxima Centauri II◦– that's a relay station for his homeworld, Epiphany."

"So…?" Hawk said.

"It would look very much like Fhen, whatever the Elan proscription on killing, has gone and incriminated himself."

I looked around at my friends, and I knew I was not alone then in feeling a subtle weight lift from our collective shoulders, and not a little relief.

Hannah took her car and returned to her apartment in Mackinley, arranging to meet me in Magenta later that day, and I drove back with Matt and Maddie.

That day I appointed a lawyer and a couple of hours later I received a call from him. The news, I learned, was good; forensics had detected traces of Fhen's DNA on the hilt of the hleth barb; however, the authorities on Elan had refused to begin extradition proceedings to have Fhen returned to Chalcedony. My lawyer said that the investigation was as good as over.

I called Hannah, but received only a recorded message. Next I called Matt and Maddie, then Hawk and Kee: they'd been informed of the good news, and agreed we should meet in the Jackeral that night to celebrate.

Later that afternoon Hannah called.

I was sitting on the balcony of the *Mantis*, nursing my third beer, when my com chimed. "Hannah," I said, staring at her face on the tiny screen. "My favourite person. Heard the good news?"

"David," she said, as if she hadn't heard a word I'd said. "I need to see you. Can I come up right away?"

"Of course," I said, the words sticking in my throat. "What is it, Hannah?"

Her expression remained neutral. "It's about what Dortmund said, David."

"What he said?" I was aware of my pulse throbbing.

"About what I was hiding," she said. "I need to tell you the truth."

* * *

I was on my fifth beer when Hannah's two-seater drove off the

road and braked beside the *Mantis*.

The truth, she had said. Whatever the truth was, I knew I wasn't going to like it. Between the end of the call and her arrival, I'd had plenty of time to worry myself sick at what she might have to tell me. How much of what she had told me so far was a lie, and was she about to admit that it was she who had, for whatever reasons, murdered Darius Dortmund? Worse, I feared that what we had shared together, what she said she felt for me, might be nothing more than a charade enacted as part of that duplicity.

I left the balcony and took the elevator to the entrance hatch. The door slid aside. I had expected, for some reason, Hannah to be cold, distant, but to my immediate relief she stepped forward and held me tight, murmuring my name over and over.

I squeezed her. "Hannah. Come on, let's go upstairs. I'll get you a drink."

We rode the elevator, Hannah gripping my hand.

I fixed her a scotch, and one for myself, and led her onto the balcony.

We sat side by side on the lounger, and I turned to look at her.

"David," she said, clutching her glass and looking into my eyes. "First of all, David, I want to tell you that I love you, that for the first time in years I've met someone I can trust."

I took her hand. "You can. So tell me…"

"I want our relationship to continue. That's more important to me than anything at the moment, my job, my life on Earth…"

"Hannah," I smiled, uneasy despite her reassurances, "you aren't making much sense."

She laughed. "Okay. Okay—" She took a breath. "First of all, what I said about moving here from Rotterdam, joining the Mackinley police… that isn't quite true. I was seconded to Chalcedony for six months, or for however long the case took to wrap up◦– after which time the plan was that I'd return to Earth and resume my old life there."

I nodded, taking it all in and feeling sick. "What case?" I asked.

"The Dortmund case. I was sent by the European Police Agency to keep an undercover surveillance on Dortmund. I had a team of six officers with me who monitored his movements around the clock."

I looked at her. "Why? What had he done?"

"Not what he had done, but what he was about to do." She took a swallow of scotch then held up the glass. "Dortmund was an alcoholic, as you might have guessed. About three months ago a woman he knew came to us in Rotterdam and said she had information about the famous Darius Dortmund that we might find of interest. He'd told her, probably bragging while drunk, that he intended a theft that would

make the Montreal jewel heist of '58 seem like child's play. That's all we had to go on. It seemed out of character, but the information was filed away, until a few weeks ago."

"What happened?"

"Dortmund made plans to leave Earth for Chalcedony and attend the opening of Matt's exhibition◦– he'd obtained tickets for himself and his Elan aide via some high-ups he knew in the European government. The information was logged and cross- referenced on our com-system, and it flagged up the earlier report we'd received about him. We couldn't see how he meant to go about the heist, but we thought we'd better be there to monitor the situation. The last thing we wanted was a diplomatic incident with the Elan."

I nodded, staring at my drink. "So why the secrecy, Hannah? Why couldn't you tell me?"

She reached out and stroked my cheek. "Think about it," she said gently. "Dortmund was an empath, maybe even a telepath. If you'd known the truth about me then he would have read it in your mind◦– and my cover would have been blown. Do you understand now why I couldn't tell you?"

"But why didn't he read you—?" I began.

She reached into the pocket of her trousers and pulled out a small, emerald-green stone set in a silver broach. "This", she said, "is a shield. It damps my thoughts, makes them unreadable to empaths and telepaths."

I smiled. "So that's why Dortmund was so suspicious of you. He even mentioned the gems. What did he say, something about such ornamentation hiding the truth…?"

Hannah nodded. "He was suspicious all right. I hoped he'd be so suspicious that he might think twice about stealing the stones."

"Well, it probably worked."

"Or", she said, "he was killed before he could effect the heist."

I smiled. "You know something, a part of me feared you were going to tell me that it was you who'd murdered him."

"Well, after what he said about you and your friends… I admit I felt like it." She shook her head. "But like the authorities, I'm pretty sure it was Fhen."

"Why? Because he knew something about Dortmund's plans?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. We might never know. But it brought the case to an abrupt halt."

I indicated our empty glasses. "A refill?"

"That would be lovely."

While I was in the kitchen, pouring the scotch, I thought over what I wanted to ask Hannah when I returned.

My mouth was dry as I carried the drinks back onto the balcony.

I sat down beside her. “The other thing I feared”, I said, “was that the ‘truth’ you mentioned might be about me and you, our relationship…”

She reached out. “David, I told you I love you. I’ve only said that to one person, in all my life.”

I stared at the disc of scotch in my glass and said, “You said, when the case was over, the plan was to return to Earth.”

“David,” she said, “that *was* the plan. Before I met you. “

I looked up. “And now?”

She shook her head. “I’m going back on the next Telemass transfer to Earth, on Wednesday, resigning my post with the RPD, putting my affairs in order, then coming back just as soon as I can. That is,” she finished, smiling, “if you’ll have me?”

I pulled her to me. “What the hell do you think?” I said.

* * *

We adjourned to the Jackeral at seven and met Matt and Maddie, Hawk and Kee. We sat on the patio, watching a late display of spindizzies playing out their pyrotechnic mating ritual. There were only a few hundred scintillating creatures disporting themselves that night, and something told me that this would be the last display of winter.

We discussed recent events, Dortmund and the Elan, and Hannah disclosed her undercover work.

Kee said, “Do you know something? Even though Dortmund was an evil man, I feel a little guilty that I’m not sorry he is dead.”

Matt gestured with his drink. “That’s an indication that you’re a good person, Kee. Myself…” “Yes?” I prompted.

He smiled. “I feel no pity at all at the passing of such a complete bastard.”

Maddie turned to Hannah. “But if you were here just because of the Dortmund case…?”

I couldn’t help grinning like a idiot. Maddie noticed and said, “What?”

Hannah said, “I’m going to Earth later in the week, settling a few things, then coming straight back. David and me”, she said, taking my hand in a tight grip, “will be living together in the *Mantis*.”

Hawk ordered champagne and Maddie proposed a toast. “To David and Hannah!” she said.

Hawk said, “I’m taking Matt and the Ambassador to Earth on Wednesday, Hannah. Why not come with us?”

“That’d be great.”

We ordered a lavish meal, and more drinks, and later, when a chill wind sprang up we went inside and settled ourselves for the evening. Maddie asked Hannah if she'd found the decision to return to Chalcedony hard, and Hannah laughed and said, "I think I knew I was coming back about two hours after I first met David," and I swear that was the nicest thing anyone had said about me in my life.

Towards midnight, the better for copious alcohol, conversation flowed and talk turned to Dortmund and Fhen, and what motives the alien might have had that allowed him to transgress his peoples' code against taking another life.

I think everyone had one theory at least, the favourite being that Fhen was aware that the Epiphany Stones were in danger, and moved to prevent their loss.

But as Kee said, "It might have been many things. I mean, how do you know what goes on inside an alien mind."

Hawk grabbed his lover drunkenly, "How indeed!" he laughed.

As we broke up that night and wended our various ways home, I was visited by the distinct impression, call it a hunch, that the affair of Dortmund and the Elan was not quite over yet.

* * *

Hannah and I made the most of our last full day together. We stayed in the *Mantis* and when we weren't making love we were planning our future life together.

On the Tuesday evening we dined alone at the Jackeral then returned to the *Mantis* for an early night. Around ten, as we were lying in bed and staring through the viewscreen at the Ring of Tharssos, my com chimed.

"I'd better get that," I said, rolling from the bed and moving to the lounge.

It was Matt. "David, I wonder if you and Hannah could meet me in the morning, before we go down to Hawk's shipyard?"

"Sure. Whereabouts?"

"If you could be at the exhibition centre at Mackinley around ten…"

"Of course. But…?"

He hesitated, then said, "There's something I have to tell you all."

I stared at his impassive face on the screen. "Matt, is everything okay?"

He nodded. "It's just that I need to see you about something before I go."

I shook my head, mystified. "About *something*?"

“About the real reason Darius Dortmund was killed,” he said, and cut the connection.

— SEVEN —

I drove Hannah down to Mackinley the following morning. We were subdued. The fact that we were parting later that day◦– albeit for less than a week◦– was bad enough, but what Matt had communicated last night made us more than a little apprehensive.

I left the roadster in the empty parking lot and we hurried hand in hand towards the sliding doors of the centre; it was a little after ten.

Hawk and Kee were in the foyer. “Matt said he’d called you last night,” Hawk said. “Any idea what this is about?”

I shook my head. “Whatever it is, I’m not exactly looking forward to it.”

Further conversation was brought to a halt with the arrival of Matt and Maddie, accompanied by the small blue figure of the Ambassador.

“Matt,” I said as they joined us.

He ushered us through a door to the main exhibition area where last week *Concordance* had played. The dome was empty now, but for a litter of plinths, cables and strewn plastic containers.

Matt indicated a semi-circle of empty foam-forms situated by the concave wall of the dome. I glanced at Hannah, who raised her eyebrows fractionally, and we sat down. Hawk and Kee sat across from us and Maddie sat beside the Ambassador to our left.

Matt remained standing, chin in hand, as he considered his words.

The suspense was unbearable. At last Hawk said, “For chrissake, Matt! What’s all this about?”

Matt smiled. “You’re all trusted friends.” He looked at Hannah. “You too, even though I’ve known you only for a matter of days.” He cleared his throat. “I’ve been in consultation with the Ambassador”, he went on, nodding towards the primly seated figure, “and he agreed that the truth should be known.”

The Ambassador gestured. “But known only to a small group of select people: yourselves, the friends of Matt Sommers.”

The alien sat back and all eyes switched to Matt. He began pacing back and forth, then paused and looked at us. “First of all”, he said, “I need to explain why Darius Dortmund visited Chalcedony, and specifically the exhibition.”

Kee said, “He was planning to steal the Epiphany Stones, no?”

Matt smiled. “Well, in a way I suppose he was.”

“In a way?” I said.

He resumed his pacing. “He wasn’t planning a traditional heist.

His theft would have been◦– *was*◦– even more audacious and seemingly impossible than any physical theft." He paused. "To explain, you must understand the range of Dortmund's abilities. We all know he was empathetic, perhaps even telepathic◦– and that exhibition the other night with the hleth barb: he was telekinetic into the bargain, though it drained him to perform such feats. He also had other mental abilities, gained through his empathetic talents and learned from the many races he met in his travels around the Expansion."

He paced back and forth, then went on, "He was a driven soul. I think we all agree that he wasn't a particularly pleasant human being. He'd turned his back on humanity and on human philosophy. He wanted more, and his entire existence was about gaining intellectual and philosophical understanding from the alien races he came into contact with. When he learned of the Elan, of their philosophies and their reverence of their ancestors via the Epiphany Stones, he wanted to investigate. He went to Epiphany some years ago, but was refused access to the stones.

"On Chalcedony, however, at my exhibition, he was not◦– and for the first time he could mentally engage, on a level we cannot even begin to imagine, with the stones and their unique contents."

I recalled Dortmund's first experience of the stones, his subsequent collapse, and then his later rapid sampling of the exhibits.

Matt was saying, "We became aware that something was wrong on the first day the exhibition was open to the public. That afternoon people reported that certain stones appeared to be losing their power, their strength. The Ambassador investigated and discovered that indeed some stones had mysteriously weakened. There seemed to be no explanation for this, until we examined a recording of the exhibition, and realised that only the stones experienced by Darius Dortmund had been affected, perhaps thirty in all."

The Ambassador carved a fluid gesture in the air and addressed us. "Forgive me, but perhaps you cannot, being human, fully appreciate the meaning of what had happened to the stones. Words and phrases like 'weakened' and 'lost their strength', while conveying in factual terms the effect on the stones of Dortmund's depredations, do not do full justice to the extent of his… ah… sacrilege."

Matt went on, "Dortmund had not just 'weakened' the effect of certain stones in the display… I know this might sound fantastic and unbelievable to you, but he had drawn into his consciousness the essences of the Elan dead contained in the stones he sampled. He wanted the knowledge of the elders, their wisdom. In effect, he had abducted the souls of revered and worshipped Elan elders."

The Ambassador used both hands to shape his emotion. "You

cannot imagine the tragedy, the… the desecration, my friends."

Hawk cleared his throat and said, "So that's why the Elan Fhen killed Dortmund and fled?"

A silence met his words.

Matt glanced at the Ambassador, who said, "As I mentioned at the villa the other morning, we Elan do not kill. We do not kill animals, insects. We certainly do not kill human beings—"

Hannah said, "But perhaps Fhen, driven to go against his people's ways by what Dortmund had done…?"

Matt was shaking his head. "Like the Ambassador said, the Elan do not kill, under any circumstances. Fhen didn't murder Darius Dortmund."

We stared at him. I said, "Then who…?"

Matt returned our collective gaze. At last he said, "I did."

Looking back, I realise I was in shock for several long seconds. My pulse pounded, and I experienced hot and cold flushes as I tried to take in Matt's words.

I stared at Hannah, who was staring wide-eyed at Matt. Hawk was open-mouthed, and Kee was clinging to him as if in fright. On the couch, Maddie had lowered her head and was inspecting her fingers; she looked up and smiled to each of us in turn. Obviously Matt had told her, at some point, of his actions.

Now he said, "Together with the Ambassador and Fhen, we went through how we should respond to Dortmund's theft, and we came to a decision, hard though it was. The opportunity arose after Dortmund displayed his ability with the hleth barb, when everyone had retired that night. Minutes later I returned to the lounge with Heanor and Fhen and confronted him. I…" Matt drew a breath, evidently reliving the moment, "I didn't take the murder of a fellow human being lightly, but I knew that it had to be done."

"But," I said, "but…" I was stuttering and shaking, failing to understand the actions of my friend. "But Dortmund had already… already weakened the stones. He'd done the deed. What was to be gained from killing him, other than revenge?"

Hawk said, "David's right. What had happened to the stones, and the souls of the elders they contained, had happened. Revenge was useless. Dortmund's death doesn't achieve anything."

Into the ensuing silence, Matt said, "But Dortmund is not dead, Hawk."

I leaned back, resting against the foam-form for support. Hawk laughed, "*What?*"

"I didn't 'kill' Dortmund for revenge, or to stop him continuing his desecration." He turned to Heanor. "Ambassador…"

The little Elan stood up. "My friends, that evening when Matt

consented to 'kill' Darius Dortmund, we had explained to him that Dortmund would not die, though it would seem so to the outside world. Dortmund contained, in his head, in his soul, the essences of our ancestors◦– and we wanted them returned."

"But how…?" Hannah began.

"Fhen and I set up one of the emptied, desecrated stones", said the Ambassador, "and the apparatus with which to convey the essence of Dortmund to it…" He stood, moved around the foam-form, and lifted into view a small valise. He opened it and carefully, with reverence, lifted out a long, faceted Epiphany Stone, sparkling emerald in the light spilling through the wall of the dome.

"My friends," he said, "this stone contains the essence of Darius Dortmund◦– and also, more importantly, the essences of those ancestors he stole from us. They are now returned, and I give thanks."

Hawk said, floundering for words, "But… my God. Dortmund is in… *that*?" He gestured to the stone. "I don't believe it!"

Matt smiled at the Ambassador. "Heanor, perhaps…?"

The alien nodded, rose to his feet with the stone and moved across the exhibition area to a vacant plinth. He set the Epiphany Stone in a recessed housing and nodded to Matt.

"I thought you might find the truth hard to take," Matt said. "So I arranged for a little demonstration. If you'd care to…" and he gestured us towards the plinth.

Cautiously, as if we were expecting some kind of trap, we stood and crossed the floor. When we were gathered before the plinthed stone, Heanor touched a switch on the column of the plinth and stood back.

Matt said. "It's ready now, if you'd care to step forward."

Hannah looked at me, gripped my hand, and we moved towards the stone. We entered a nimbus of ruby light, and were soon joined by the others.

Instantly we were enveloped by a sensation of being removed from the here and now, quickly followed by what I could only describe as an impression of enlightenment◦– intellectual enlightenment, that is, not some beatific spiritual dawning of realisation. It was as if I were a scientist who had happened upon some fundamental truth underpinning the reality of the universe. What that truth was, exactly, was beyond my intellect to comprehend: I merely sensed the excitement of curiosity fulfilled, of knowledge gained…

And then I saw the figures in the ruby mist before us. They were Elan, a small gathering of the alien beings◦– and I knew that they were the dead ancestors 'abducted', as it were, by Darius Dortmund's desecration.

A second later, shockingly, I saw the tall figure of Dortmund himself in their midst, looming above them like some kind of patriarch.

And, at the sight of him, it was as if I were granted some intimation of his joy at being united at last with what he had sought for so long… or at least that's the sensation I gained at the time.

I was aware of Hannah's hand in mine, gripping me tightly. Beside us I made out Hawk and Kee, Matt and Maddie.

Dortmund approached, seeming to drift into greater focus. He paused before us, smiling at us◦– genuinely smiling, something I had never seen him do while alive.

His thin, pale face turned in the direction of Matt, and he mouthed something to him.

Later, we debated his words. I was convinced he said, "Thank you…" while Hannah thought he shaped the words, "The wonder…" Hawk was convinced he heard a soft, "Unity… The answer, at last…"

Seconds later the image faded; Dortmund receded along with the Elan, and we stepped, dazed, from the nimbus of ruby light.

We stood in stunned silence for a long minute. I held Hannah to me, her solidity reassuring after the abstract reality we had experienced.

A little later, Matt looked across at Hannah and said softly, "You can arrest me, Hannah, and I'll make a full confession. I'll willingly go on trial and defend what I did, for the sake of the Elan and their ancestors."

I looked at Hannah, stricken, and realised that I was gripping her hand as if in desperation. She was open-mouthed, wide-eyed, and slowly shook her head back and forth. At last she said, "How could I do that, when…?" and she gestured towards the Epiphany Stone.

I glanced across at Matt; he was holding Maddie and she was weeping against his chest.

Heanor was removing the Epiphany Stone from its plinth and slipping it into the case. He smiled at us, "And now, my friends, perhaps it is time to repair to the shipyard?"

Together we moved from the exhibition centre and emerged into the dazzling winter sunlight.

— CODA —

Hawk's starship sat proudly amidst the junked remains of less fortunate space-going vessels. Golden in the winter sunlight, it squatted on the haunches of its ram-jets as if eager to take off.

We stood at the foot of the steps that rose steeply into the bulbous body of the ship. I held Hannah. "Can't wait to see you again," I murmured.

The truth to tell, I was still in a state of shock following what Matt had just shown us… and the implications of his revelation… and now Hannah was leaving me.

"Just five days, David, and then I'll be back. I'm looking forward to it more than anything in the universe…" She laughed. "Listen to me, I'm sounding like a love-sick teenager."

Matt approached. He held out his hand. "David. I'll be back in a week. Let's talk about everything that happened over a beer at the Jackeral, okay?"

I gripped his hand, looked into his eyes. "We'll do that," I said.

I kissed Hannah one last time before she, Matt and the Ambassador climbed the steps into the starship. At the top, Hannah turned and waved down at me. Then she disappeared from sight as the thick hatch sealed itself with a pressurised hiss.

Maddie, Kee and I backed off to a safe distance and stood and watched as, five minutes later, the ship powered up with a thunderous roar of its ram-jets, rose, turned on its axis and moved, slowly at first, towards the distant, shining filament of the golden column. Then it engaged its main drive and leaped forward so that, seconds later, it was a rapidly diminishing speck in the distance.

I blinked away the tears and realised that I could do with a drink.

Maddie was of a like mind. "C'mon, Mr Conway, Kee. I think a stiff one at the Jackeral is in order…"

Then, considering the events of the morning and wishing away the days until Hannah's return, I returned to my roadster and drove slowly up the coast road to Magenta Bay.

About the Author

ERIC BROWN began writing when he was fifteen and sold his first short story to *Interzone* in 1986. He has won the British Science Fiction Award twice for his short stories and has published over thirty books. His latest include the novel *Xenopath* and the children's book *Guilty*. He writes a monthly science fiction review column for the *Guardian*.

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